





Devised By - Brandon Saltalamacchia (retrododo.com)
Production Director - Andrew J. Dickinson
Editor & Additional Words - Andrew J. Dickinson
Additional Editing & Proofing - Benjamin Hayhoe, Shaun Hughes, Abram Buehner, Ewan Wilson
Creative Director - Jon Doyle
Design Director - Eliza Marzec
Marketing - Brandon Saltalamacchia
Photography - @b_b_retro
Design Team - Josh Lanphear, Nat King, Dan Clarke, Jeff Wiggins
Key Art - Stephen Graham

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Email: publishing@lostincult.co.uk
Instagram & Twitter: @lostincult

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A
HANDHELD
HISTORY

RETRO
DODO

I have created many pieces of content in my time, but what you are holding right now is by far the piece I am most proud of.

I want to say thank you to Jon Doyle and the Lost In Cult team for believing in my vision of creating a book for handheld enthusiasts. I was refused by many publishers and ignored by many more, but Lost In Cult took a chance on me. They took a risk to hear what I had to say, and took an even bigger risk by partnering with me to create what you are holding today. They are an incredible group of professionals that I will forever respect and I believe they are crafting one of the best indie publishers in the gaming industry to date.

I want to thank my life partner Kate Griffiths for keeping me out of the dark holes that my creative mind tends to fall into, for inspiring me to treat others like thy neighbour and for allowing me to buy more and more handhelds for “research purposes”. There’s nobody else I would rather venture through life with.

Thank you to my mother and father Carlo and Jackie Saltalamacchia for buying me a Game Boy Color back in 1999 — it has cemented a core memory that has led me to where I am today, you have guided me through life with love, affection and open arms, something a son can ask no more of.

Thanks to Sebastian Santarbara for helping me build Retro Dodo into an awesome brand that entertains retro gamers across the globe. Thanks to my brother Brett Saltalamacchia for buying five copies of this book when you only have three friends, and thank you to James Jarvis for landing me my first job in the gaming industry, it helped me find my passion.

But most importantly thank you, yes you, for buying a copy of this book. Your purchase has helped bring this book to life and it wouldn’t be here today without your support.

Brandon Saltalamacchia

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FOREWORD.

There is something truly magical about handheld consoles, something their fuller featured console cousins have never quite been able to match. Perhaps dedicated handheld consoles are satisfying because they're designed, from the chipset up, to be self-sufficient, without the distractions of ancillary hardware. They don't require an additional controller, an attached RF or HDMI cable, a CRT or a flatscreen to carry you off to your chosen gaming nirvana. They sit in your hands with a subtle balance between hardware and software, and like witchcraft, convert a mundane bus journey into something transcendental.

My first handheld gaming device with the ability to accept multiple cartridges was the Game Boy. I'd had various single-use handhelds before Nintendo's revolutionary machine — *Merlin* and *Donkey Kong* Game & Watch come to mind — **but 1990 saw me snapping *Tennis* and *Tetris* into my very own fashionably off-white asymmetric box. It still surprises me how awful that green LCD display is without a strong source of light, but even now, there's a quality to those four shades of grey — they help define this exquisite piece of late '80s product design as something unmatched. That's quite the achievement when you consider the innovation in the handheld gaming sector over the decades that followed.**

The colour LCD of the Game Boy contemporary Atari Lynx is worthy of a mention. It may have been let down by a shortage of titles, but it was COLOUR, and it rendered the likes of *Ninja Gaiden III* and *Robotron 2084* with a vivid palette that, for some early adopters, left the monochrome Game Boy wanting. For me though, it was Game Gear all the way. I never stopped loving my Game Boy — especially as the decade moved on and the likes of *Zelda* arrived on the pocket-sized platform — but I was beguiled by Sega's portable effort from launch. Game Gear's critical reception was mixed; gamers were amazed by its full-colour backlit screen and the impressive grunt of its processor, but the battery performance was a genuine issue. From memory, two and a half hours is the time I managed to squeeze from 6 AAs — three and a half hours tops — which made powering the thing an expensive handicap. With my Game Boy, I seem to remember getting double the time from fewer batteries. But Nintendo couldn't offer me colour versions of *California Games*, *Streets of Rage 2*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Mega Man* and *Sonic*. And they certainly couldn't offer me Game Gear's legendary analogue TV Tuner!

Beyond the heady days of the early '90s, portables have come and gone in a range of exotic specifications. I never owned a Sega Nomad, Sega's second and last portable console. It may have suffered from Sega's poor portable battery DNA, but you could load up your Mega Drive/Genesis carts and take them away with you on holiday, so what's not to like? The portable I have the strangest relationship to is the Gizmondo. Not only was this strange horn-buttoned innovation supposed to offer a GPS-enhanced location-specific gaming experience (something that never materialised), but the company's alleged ties to a Swedish mafia organisation came to light only months before its collapse. I remember meeting several members of their team at CES in Vegas, and was even due to help them market the device, when I learnt of the company's spectacular implosion. I think I dodged a portable console bullet there!

When we talk about the hardware we've relied on to extend our gaming habits outside of four walls, it ultimately boils down to great gaming experiences. In this regard, it's hard to match Nintendo's inspired approach to game creation — *Advance Wars*, *Mario Kart: Super Circuit*, and *Super Mario World* on the Game Boy Advance spring to mind. And a mention must be given to Sony's inspirational entry into the portable market: the original PlayStation Portable. I was working on a well-known mainstream gadget TV show in the UK when I was tasked with travelling to Japan to see the new system in its infancy. I'll never forget how slick it first appeared in comparison to the toy-like quality of almost every one of its contemporaries. Memory Stick, UMD, a wickedly powerful graphics chip, and WiFi. WiFi!! The dual-screened Nintendo DS was innovative, but the PSP was, in design terms at least, like a grown-up luxury sports car. That's without even mentioning its phenomenal library of games, with *Wipeout*, *Ridge Racer*, *Metal Gear Solid*, and *Grand Theft Auto* all making an appearance.

We've come a long way since some boffins in a laboratory in a Tokyo side street decided that they couldn't stand to leave their gaming at home. As we move towards a future where we're likely to be wearing the next phase of portable gaming hardware, it's important to look back and appreciate how one of the most out-there creative sectors in gaming has evolved, and just how much pleasure it's brought us. This book is a celebration of the visionary nature of the hardware and software that makes our gaming portables some of the most cherished devices we own. I hope you enjoy it!



First Released:
1981

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Forty Years And Counting

The first Game & Watch with a colour screen released in 2020, celebrating both the 35th anniversary of Super Mario Bros. and 40 years of Game & Watch.

GAME & WATCH.

It could be argued that the Game & Watch was the handheld that pushed portable gaming to the masses. It was neither the first handheld, nor the best — but it was one of the most influential.

The Game & Watch was not technically a handheld as we know them today, instead it was a series of portable game devices usually featuring one game apiece. Released by Nintendo between 1980 and 1991, they collectively sold over 43 million units worldwide, which at the time was deemed an incredible achievement, proving to the world that children and adults of all ages wanted portable games consoles for entertainment purposes.

The main reason it turned into such a magical device is because of the talented game designer behind it, known as Gunpei Yokoi. Gunpei is surely one of the main reasons Nintendo's products stole the hearts of millions.

In 1966, the President of Nintendo, Hiroshi Yamauchi, was visiting a factory and noticed a toy which looked like an extending arm. After asking who made it he was introduced to the lovely soul that was Gunpei Yokoi. After much conversation, Gunpei joined Nintendo and they took the extended arm to retail, calling it the Ultra Hand, which eventually went on to be a huge success.

As the years went by, Gunpei invented the D-pad, which became a major part of the newer Game & Watch variants. The D-pad's success here meant that almost every games console to date would have a little piece of Gunpei Yokoi contained within it. Sadly, Gunpei passed away in 1997 at the age of 57, but his creations live on, bringing gamers joy on a daily basis.

Nintendo and Gunpei's Game & Watch stayed around for years, with multiple variations of the device releasing alongside new games to play, collect, and trade with friends. The first Game & Watch launched in 1980 and was simply titled Ball. Instead of a D-pad, this silver device had two round red action buttons that directed the juggler's hands within the

small liquid crystal display.

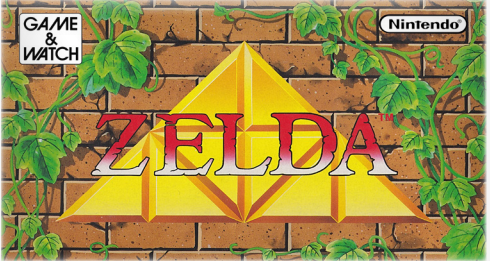
Below the screen you had a few extra buttons: Game A was the original game and then Game B was typically a faster, harder version. There was also another button which remained on all Game & Watch devices titled 'Time' — this is why the handheld has the name Game & Watch. Each unit has the ability to show the time, meaning children could use this as a clock, setting alarms and watching the animated display when not playing the games.

As the years went by, the Game & Watch evolved and it gave customers even more games to choose from. For example, the D-pad first made its way onto a Game & Watch in 1982 on the *Donkey Kong* variant — this unit also featured a clamshell design, with Nintendo even adding two screens, making it even more immersive.

These little devices also featured some very well-known characters such as Mario, Donkey Kong, and Link, persuading adults and children alike to buy them in their thousands. The popularity of the Game & Watch didn't go unnoticed as Tiger Electronics were soon to compete with their own handheld devices in hopes of taking a slice of the pie.

Throughout the life of the Game & Watch, Nintendo kept a close eye on sales. Even though it surpassed their initial goals, towards the late '80s they noticed gamers weren't buying as many as they had been originally, simply due to each handheld only being capable of playing a single game, along with the fact that the difficulty of these games were often far too easy.

The Game & Watch's downfall was also possibly due to the lack of responsiveness in the LCD display, meaning that it took a certain amount of time to change state, making games sluggish, easy to predict, and sometimes a little boring. This was especially true since these were devices people would play on for many months. And so Nintendo and Gunpei moved on to a far more diverse console that could play multiple games on a single device using cartridges: the Game Boy. Maybe you've heard of it?



001

002

003

004

001
Bomb Sweeper
[Vertical Multi Screen Game & Watch]
1987

003
Mario's Cement Factory
[New Wide Sceen Game & Watch]
1983

002
Parachute
[Wide Screen Game & Watch]
1981

004
Zelda
[Vertical Multi Screen Game & Watch]
1989



First Released:
1989

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Launch Price:
JP ¥12,500
US \$89.99
UK £69.99

The Toy Maker

Gunpei Yokoi was born in Osaka during the Second World War, and was hired by Nintendo in 1965 after graduating from university with a degree in electronics. He went from maintaining the machines that made Nintendo's hanafuda cards to creating toys such as the Ultra Arm and the Ten Billion Barrel puzzle, before finally working on electronic games.

GAME BOY.

Throughout this book you will read many personal stories about games that left an impact on the various writers featured. You will be regaled with tales of pocketable machines crammed with possibilities, experiences loaded with meaning. Handhelds connect players to video games on an intimate level, as we must cradle them in our palms and draw them in close. Not simply left below a TV as a port of call, handheld consoles are with you for the voyage as a trusty companion, reliably ever-present. Comforting, engrossing, enticing.

A book like this being created is therefore only natural. The vast majority of those who possess an attachment to video games have their own stories to tell about handhelds, each of which more distinct than is often the case for their home-bound counterparts. But this book's creation isn't really natural at all. It's the by-product of good fortune. A long-gestating consequence of a gift we all received in 1989 that defined this entire category of interactive entertainment, solidifying it as a concept and giving it the foundation it needed to thrive all the way to the present day. A rip-roaring success that exceeded the wildest dreams of all those involved, subsequently changing the course of gaming history. Without the Game Boy, the idea of games-on-the-go as we know them, the legacy those games left behind, and the words that fill these pages, would all cease to exist. Any form of portable gaming that came forward in its place would have been a footnote by comparison.

The Game Boy was not the first handheld gaming device, nor was it the most technically advanced portable console available to purchase while it was on the market. Nintendo had already been making LCD Game & Watches for many years, and rival manufacturers pumped out a bevy of beefier products in the early '90s that made the Game Boy look utterly primitive. But of course, none of that remotely matters. You don't need to be at the front of the queue or bursting with power to attain the highest levels of influence and significance. You simply need a clear vision, and a purity of design that resonates with the players.

To call the Game Boy a phenomenon might actually be an understatement. It was an undeniable cultural moment that completely altered the way people perceived and interacted with entertainment. Nowadays, having access to the collective artistic works of human history is but a few taps away, but on the precipice of the '80s and '90s, that was unthinkable. At best, the first iterations of handhelds could play one extremely simplistic game, or if it could play multiple games, the device would be unwieldy and prohibitively expensive. In order to make the dream of putting entire worlds in the fingertips of the masses possible, Nintendo would have to approach the creation of the Game Boy from a very specific angle, devised by their smoking gun, Gunpei Yokoi.

I'd wager that the majority of you reading this will be familiar with Gunpei Yokoi's famous adage "lateral thinking with withered technology". Oft-quoted and aptly celebrated, Yokoi's philosophy on using outmoded methods to solve new problems is one that he'd established years prior as a toy designer, and which Nintendo carried with it long after he left the company. Yokoi sadly died in a tragic car accident just over a year after his departure from Nintendo, but his words forever echo amidst the halls of its Kyoto HQ. Among the many beloved products he created, this wisdom he imparted still stands out as a wonderful shorthand for his overall impact.

Yet, I feel that this quote's meaning is often undersold. When it comes to the Game Boy, people tend to remember the "withered technology" part, whilst omitting the wider implications of "lateral thinking". The Game Boy was not just created using older components and methods for the sake of reducing its cost, in turn making it more of a viable product (although that's certainly an extremely significant part of the equation), but additionally as a springboard to inspired game design. Those withered attributes are the shackle that acts as the mother of invention. Art is often enhanced by restrictions. Untethered creative freedom with limitless possibilities and no form of guidelines, boundaries or requirements, can often be a recipe for unfocused, unopti-

005
Game Boy
[Original UK Packaging]
1989

006
Game Boy Light Pikachu Console
[Pokémon Center Exclusive]
1998



005



006

mised, and frankly unremarkable results. It’s a common misconception that the heart of imagination lies in sheer autonomy, when in reality a set of parameters can lead us towards more enlightened conclusions. The solutions to the barriers we have to work around end up becoming art unto themselves, adding layers and a sense of cohesion to what we manifest.

The launch lineups of the most overpowered consoles in gaming’s storied past are very rarely the ones that retain spaces in our minds and souls. Making video games is already difficult, so making video games with brand new bleeding-edge technology must be an absolute nightmare, and it tends to show in the final product. It sometimes takes years for studios to create games that feel uncompromised on these snarling machines, as power creep lives hand in hand with prioritising style over substance. The Game Boy instead chose to be delightfully bare-bones. It did the absolute bare minimum to share recognisable qualities with what contemporaneous games had evolved into. By stripping down the hardware to its core essential parts, the games that were produced from day one were all the very best they could be. Developers knew how to easily make games work on this thing, the question was how many of their ideas could they fit into the little grey cartridges.

Leaning on the quickly developing name recognition of franchises forged on the Famicom/NES, Nintendo was steadily amassing a veritable war chest of top-shelf IP. Adapting them to suit the Game Boy was a no-brainer, but figuring out a way to make them move forwards on technology that was looking backwards was a significant hurdle. Lateral thinking prevailed though, as stand-out games like *The Legend of Zelda: Link’s Awakening* demonstrated with panache that grand adventures could be contained in the most unassuming of packages. The limitations led to a densely constructed overworld, dungeons with intertwining rooms, and a laser-focus on maximising the potential of each story beat and enemy encounter. *Link’s Awakening* was an effective, no-nonsense jaunt that proved the Game Boy could produce true successors to not only NES titles, but to SNES games too. It held much more in common with *A Link to the Past* than the original two games, which was shocking both then and now.

Mario of course had his time in the sun with *Super Mario Land*, which was swiftly overhauled by its sequel *Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins* just a few years later, mirroring the large leaps between instalments during Mario’s NES tenure. Despite being able to leverage the familiar tech to make great games out of the gate, the *Land* games illustrate that there was still a wide berth for experimentation. Restrictions shouldn’t be conflated with being locked to one path, as each bold workaround usually led to something even smarter within a short period of time. This is demonstrated quite clearly by the third game in the series (or the first entry in a new

series with the benefit of hindsight) *Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3*, a totally different beast that veered off in a wacky direction.

Metroid II: Return of Samus and *Kid Icarus: Of Myths and Monsters* felt like logical sequels to their NES forebears, a sharp contrast to the ‘spin-off’ or ‘side story’ designation that many games from later handheld generations would be relegated to. Donkey Kong’s own *Land* trilogy (following the *Country* line of games) showed that a limited display didn’t have to stifle visual ambition, while 1994’s *Donkey Kong* (carrying the torch for the arcade series) instead invested all of its ambition into its gameplay and level design. The Game Boy was also the undisputed king of puzzlers, beginning with the seminal launch title *Tetris*. Preceding the console by about 5 years, *Tetris* was already well cemented within the gaming landscape, but it wasn’t until it was made palm-sized that it became a legendary smash-hit. Tetris was one of the many games that just worked better in this scaled-down format, and it kickstarted a scramble to find the next champion of pick-up-and-play.

Giving a fresh lease of life to known favourites is certainly no mean feat, but where the Game Boy truly excelled was the introduction of brand new tailor-made IP. To become the face of the Game Boy, you’d need to be streamlined and approachable, charming and optimised. Kirby was the blob for the job. Masahiro Sakurai granted us the joy of meeting Kirby in 1992, and he quickly became everyone’s favourite round friend. *Kirby’s Dream Land* and *Dream Land 2* are emblematic of the notion that raw simplicity doesn’t equate to a lack of quality, and the varied string of spin-offs that followed mirror the diversity of the console’s overall catalogue. Kirby is the ultimate mascot for the Game Boy, yet he still comes in second place to the true master of the system.

Pokémon was the silver bullet. From humble beginnings as a Game Boy RPG made by a small scrappy team, *Pokémon* rapidly ascended to world domination, reaching far and wide into every facet of children’s lives on the path to become the world’s number one media franchise. The story of how it achieved this is worthy of a book unto itself, but the headline here is that it made the Game Boy utterly essential. To kids on the playground, it was their lifeline — a way to be a part of the conversation and the action, a rallying force that forged friendships through fanaticism. *Pokémon Red/Blue/Yellow* (and *Green*!) let us play in a world that felt full and alive, contained within the pea-green dot-matrix screen as if it were produced by actual sorcery. Imaginations were ignited in Kanto, in a uniquely Game Boy way. The inimitable and unforgettable monster-catcher was a statement of intent, promising the Game Boy’s permanent seat in the canon of video games.

Part of the fun of *Pokémon* was born out of one of the Game Boy’s most forward-thinking inclusions:

a small port that allowed players to connect consoles via link cable. Tethering your precious personal devices together had a fantastic sense of novelty, and worked just as intended, encouraging us all to view play as a social activity. The port additionally enabled the use of the Game Boy Printer for manifesting 8-bit graphics into a physical format, or for keeping permanent copies of photos taken with the Game Boy Camera. Going full kitchen-sink, the Camera was one of Nintendo’s attempts to inject its trademark whimsical gimmicks into the Game Boy’s arsenal. Unlike the Printer, the Camera was an insertable cartridge with a swivelling lens on the top, making it more in line with the special Game Paks that encased quirky additions such as rumble motors for the likes of *Pokémon Pinball*, or accelerometers to equip *Kirby Tilt ‘n’ Tumble* with oddly accurate motion controls.

Of course, not all hardware additions can be bolted on, some require a full overhaul. The Game Boy Pocket helped to alleviate the original model’s voracious battery consumption (despite it already running circles around the competition), as well as switching out the soupy green screen for a bona fide monochromatic display. A better, larger screen on a smaller unit seemed like the perfect upgrade in 1996, but an even greater one came in 1998, atoning for the Game Boy’s final sin: the lack of a backlight. Nintendo said “let there be Game Boy Light”, but only in Japan. I guess you’ve gotta keep the best stuff for yourself sometimes. Revising its handheld hardware every few years provided the company with a bulletproof business model for its future forays, whilst also affording the rest of us a small insight into how Nintendo appraises its products post-release.

The Game Boy lived a long and illustrious life, perched on store shelves for over a decade, amassing eye-watering sales numbers that have kept it firmly on the best-sellers podium right up to the present day. This little console that could came at the perfect time. Just as the Japanese electronics craze hit its peak in the ‘90s, the Game Boy typified what people loved about the distinct aesthetics and peerless functionality of Japan’s industrial design. It evokes nostalgia in those who’ve never even touched one, and was one of the last hurrahs of an entire era of both classic video games and classic gadgetry. Nintendo’s mission was to build a handheld video game system that could be robust and accessible; the result was a perfectly sculpted, eternally enduring icon.

Retro Rebirth

Even though the Game Boy is as old as Daniel Radcliffe, indie developers are still producing games and even cartridges for the Game Boy to this day. The simplicity and aesthetic appeals to many who grew up with the handheld, and with over 100 million devices out there, it’s still one of the best-selling consoles of all time.



007



008



009



016



017



018



010



011



012



019



020



021



013



014



015



022



023



024

007
Game Boy Red
1995

010
Game Boy Yellow
1995

013
Hyundai Mini Comboy
1991

008
Game Boy Green
1995

011
Game Boy Traditional White
1995

014
Game Boy Transparent
1995

009
Game Boy Blue
1995

012
Game Boy Deep Black
1995

015
Manchester United Football Club
1995

016
Game Boy Pocket Red
1996

019
Game Boy Pocket Pink
1996

022
Game Boy Pocket Atlus Edition
1997

017
Game Boy Pocket Yellow
1996

020
Game Boy Pocket Gold
1996

023
Game Boy Pocket Atomic Purple
1996

018
Game Boy Pocket Green
1996

021
Game Boy Pocket Silver
1996

024
Game Boy Pocket Toyota Edition
1997



GAME BOY COLOR.

First Released:
1998

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Launch Price:
JP ¥8,900
US \$69.99
UK £69.99

I have a very special place in my heart for the Game Boy Color. It was the first handheld console that I ever owned and it single-handedly got me to where I am today. It sparked my love for video games as a child, it motivated me to start my career in the games industry as a young man, and it eventually pushed me over the edge to leave my full-time job to grow Retro Dodo with nothing but a little bit of pocket money and a boatload of passion.

Handheld consoles have affected millions of peoples lives, and I am just one of them. What I am trying to say is that the Game Boy Color made this book that you are holding today possible — crazy, right? Some of my best childhood moments revolve around this incredible piece of technology, so much so that it's actually linked to some of my earliest memories.

I remember vividly opening up *Pokémon Yellow* for my 8th birthday — I was so excited that I remember my little chubby 4 foot frame was pumped with adrenaline. The first thing I did was rip the box to shreds (I now regret that decision after seeing the prices of a boxed *Pokémon Yellow* on eBay), blow the imaginary dust out of the new cartridge, slot it into my turquoise Game Boy Color, and pull out the over-sized gaming guide that I bought with my own pocket money the week before. I'll never forget that day.

The Game Boy Color launched in October 1998, and, although it wasn't really mind-blowing when you look at how the line of Game Boys evolved over time, it was the first glimpse at Nintendo's take on colour screens for their portable devices. Admittedly, Sega and Atari got there first, but Nintendo had the advantage of the Game Boy Color being far more portable, while also allowing gamers to use their old library of Game Boy cartridges, making it more appealing for parents who already forked out on the original DMG model. Nintendo knew what it was doing!

Unfortunately, the new colour screen was not backlit, but with its new display and brand new colour games, it was enough to fend off the competition. The Neo Geo Pocket and Bandai's WonderSwan (which became its closest competition) saw just how popular the console was and decided to release their very own consoles with colour screens shortly after in order to compete — the Neo Geo Pocket Color and the WonderSwan Color. As you can imagine, they didn't come close

to Nintendo's sales.

Shortly after the launch of the Game Boy Color, Nintendo released *Pokémon Gold & Silver* into the wild, and it felt like the world wasn't ready for what was about to happen. The game sold over 23 million units worldwide, making it one of the best selling Nintendo games of all time.

I remember seeing long lines of gamers queuing to get a copy. The local parks were filled with trading cables and Pokémon were being traded for absurd things — I saw a kid trade three Beyblades and a bag of sweets for a Mareep, which, for those of you that don't know, is one of the most common Pokémon in the game and happens to look like a sheep. Unlucky, buddy.

Nintendo completely nailed the marketing and the branding of the Game Boy Color, coercing practically every kid into wanting one through constant TV commercials and advertisements in magazines. It felt as if Toys 'R Us was covering every promotional shelf with Game Boy products too — parents had nowhere to hide from Nintendo's aggressive marketing strategy.

The new curved shell combined with the colour screen, and the need for only two AA batteries to power it, is what helped push the \$69 handheld into many households. It was also one of the first handheld consoles to be absolutely pounded with cheap, crazy-looking peripherals. Yes, the Game Boy DMG started this obscure market, but the Game Boy Color is what took it to a whole new level, featuring all kinds of different magnifiers, wormlights, grips, speakers, and battery packs.

The way to tell if your friends at school had wealthy parents wasn't the fact that they had a brand new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* backpack, and Buzz Lightyear sunglasses far to big for their head; it was actually showcased by how big and ugly their Game Boy Color looked due to the sheer amount of accessories that were attached to it.

At this moment the world knew who Nintendo was, even if they had never touched a games console in their life. For me, and many gamers worldwide, it was the moment that the handheld gaming industry became mainstream. It may only have been a simple upgrade from the original, but it just goes to show what a difference a colour screen can make.



025



026



027



028



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030



031



032



033

025
Game Boy Color Kiwi
1998

028
Game Boy Color Grape
1998

031
Game Boy Color Tommy Hilfiger
1999

026
Game Boy Color Teal
1998

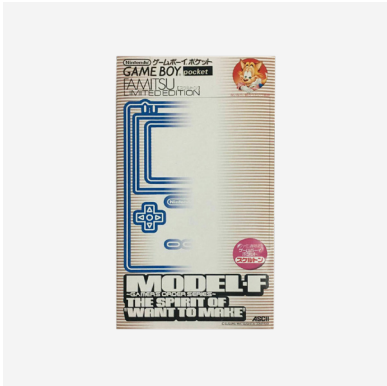
029
Game Boy Color Atomic Purple
1998

032
Game Boy Color Sakura Taisen
2000

027
Game Boy Color Dandelion
1998

030
Game Boy Color Daiei Hawks
1999

033
Game Boy Color Pokémon Edition
1999



034



035



036



037



038



039



040



041



042

034
Game Boy Pocket Famitsu Model-F
1997

037
Game Boy Pocket Extreme Green
1997

040
Game Boy Light Famitsu Exclusive
1998

035
Game Boy Pocket Seibu Lions Edition
1998

038
Game Boy Pocket Imagineer Edition
1996

041
Game Boy Light Astro Boy Edition
1998

036
Game Boy Pocket Gold
1996

039
Game Boy Pocket Hello Kitty Bundle
1997

042
Game Boy Light Osamu Tezuka Edition
1998



First Released:
2001

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Launch Price:
JP ¥9,800
US \$99.99
UK £79.99

Oxy-tocin

There's a lot to love about the Game Boy Micro, originally code named Oxy. Not only was it genuinely tiny, but it also got a rare and beautiful Mother 3 variation in red, with a copy of the game and a physical Franklin badge included.

GAME BOY ADVANCE.

A friend once told me that in order to be successful with something, you either need to do it differently from everyone else or do it better. Nintendo has certainly been a champion of this mantra throughout its illustrious history, but especially in recent times. Forsaking the need to compete in any traditional sense with its console rivals — if they can even be called that — Nintendo instead focused on innovation and convenience, exploiting gimmicks in such a robust way that they could no longer be considered gimmicks, but instead methodical applications of clever concepts. That is with the exception of Labo — sorry.

But there's one series of Nintendo handheld consoles, in particular, that tied this philosophy together — to do something better and to do it differently, developing greatness into grandness throughout its fascinating model evolutions.

Project Atlantis, or as it would come to be known, the Game Boy Advance.

This remarkable new handheld arrived on March 21st, 2001 in Japan, followed by the US and PAL regions on the 11th and 22nd of June respectively. Now, if you've already read the Game Boy Color piece in this book, you'll know that the previous Nintendo handheld released less than three years prior. So if you're thinking the GBA mercilessly cut the Color down in the prime of its life, you're absolutely right. But we've got to move past that, because it was totally worth it. The GBA used a 32-bit ARM RISC processor, providing an incredible leap in graphical and audio quality from its predecessor, though it still sported a Z80-like co-processor that allowed Game Boy games to be played via backwards compatibility, continuing the company's trend for supporting its back catalogue.

The system came in a host of different colours to choose from, including Black, Arctic (white), Glacier (clear blue), Fuchsia (clear pink), and the classic and gorgeous Indigo. Japan got an exclusive Spice (orange), too — the gits. However, plenty of limited edition colours were released throughout its lifespan, including Red, Clear Orange/Black, Platinum, and Gold, and there were some cool game special editions, too. Who doesn't want a *Hello Kitty* Game Boy? It boasted a 50% improved battery life compared

to the GBC, and was the first Nintendo handheld to opt for a landscape view, providing a 50% increase in screen size to best express its flashy new graphical capabilities. It also introduced shoulder buttons to the Game Boy for the first time, allowing developers to create games with more complex control schemes in mind.

Depending on where you were in the world, your experience of the launch would have been very different. Japan got a plethora of titles at launch. In the US and PAL regions, we didn't get a library quite as vast. But with big first-party hitters like *F-Zero: Maximum Velocity* and *Super Mario Advance* — a modern remake of the *Mario Bros.* and *Super Mario Bros. 2* games — I'm not going to complain. Thankfully, third-party support was superb, and we saw cracking titles lit up in beautiful 32-bit colour, like *Rayman Advance*, *Castlevania: Circle of the Moon*, and a port of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2* that was so good, it unfathomably took its place as the highest-rated launch title for the GBA on Metacritic. Rad!

The GBA sold 81,000 units in its first week in the UK, beating the previous record of the PS2's 20,000 units by an absurd margin. It set the same record in the US, selling over 500,000 units in its first week — an incredible achievement for Nintendo.

We'd have some more superb titles in 2001. *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* released — incidentally the first *Mario Kart* game to appear on a handheld — as well as *Wario Land 4*. The critically acclaimed RPG series *Golden Sun* also made its debut in all regions this year. But there's one title that many hold as the gold standard of GBA titles, and that was *Advance Wars* — simply sensational turn-based gameplay that defined what the console was designed for. Needless to say, the GBA held strong throughout its first year.

However, it would be in its second year that the GBA library would really capitalise on what it does best — nostalgia. Following the critical and commercial success of *Super Mario Advance*, Nintendo would release two more SMA titles in 2002: *SMA 2*, a remake of *Super Mario World*; and *SMA 3*, a remake of *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island*. Like the launch title, these all featured numerous visual, gameplay, and level design changes that offered a fantastic package. They were critically lauded and sold

very well, particularly the much-loved remake of *Super Mario World*, which remained the best-selling of the series throughout the console's lifespan. Nintendo also dipped into some more of its best IP this year. *Zelda* made its GBA debut in 2002 with a modified port of the 1991 SNES title, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. It received very little modification from the SNES original (why would it need to?), but the 32-bit GBA graphics made every element of its colourful world pop with fantastic clarity. It also came with a bonus title called *Four Swords* which worked as a 2D prequel to *Ocarina of Time*, utilising the GBA's Link Cable to play with friends in a four-player *Zelda* adventure. This extensive, refined offering resulted in a Metacritic score that met previous record holder *Tony Hawk*. Both remained there as the two highest-rated GBA games of all time. Not bad!

It wasn't all about the good old days, though. Nintendo blew minds with *Metroid Fusion*, the first *Metroid* game to release in 8 years. This entry in the series was, and still is, considered a masterpiece. It provided a perfect place for players to start in the franchise, also demonstrating that *Metroid* could work in a linear format. It had a terrifying villain in SA-X — a parasitic mimic of Samus herself, and it worked perfectly with the GBA's controls, giving a much greater sense of fluidity than in the SNES' *Super Metroid*. It released in the US first, on November 17th, the same day that *Metroid Prime* released on the GameCube. What a day to be a *Metroid* fan...

But this wasn't just an overt tactic for melting fans' brains — the games were released together to offer an opportunity to employ one of Nintendo's finest peripherals: the GameCube Game Boy Advance Cable. This humble device that cost about 10 quid would allow a Game Boy Advance and GameCube to talk to one another. Some games needed to have a game inserted in the handheld for the connection to work, such as *Fusion/Prime*, which would allow Samus to acquire some exclusive items in *Prime* as a result. Other games would utilise the GBA's 256K of system RAM to execute programmes without the need for any cartridge in the slot. Nintendo went all out with this in *Animal Crossing* on the GameCube, where players could link their GBA up to the console to unlock a special tropical island filled with rare or exclusive items, as well as utilise a little art programme on the GBA to design textures, or even play a library of NES titles. Some games, like *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, allowed friends to join in the fun by taking an additional role as Tingle in-game using the GBA. This second player could support Link by interacting with a map on the GBA screen, blowing things up with bombs, offering protection, and identifying hidden areas, amongst other things.

You might expect Nintendo to have been the first to run with this concept, but the first title to actually make use of the GC GBA Cable was *Sonic Adventure 2: Battle*. It may seem odd, but what Nintendo was doing here was not so different to what Sega had done with the Dreamcast's Visual Memory Unit functionality some years prior, so it makes sense they'd be early adopters of the tech. GBA players in Japan, Australia, and the US were also treated to a nifty peripheral called the Nintendo e-Reader that slotted into the GBA slot. It used an LED scanner to register paper e-Reader cards that provided in-game bonuses, like secret items, levels, or mini-games. The device never gained much popularity outside of Japan, and we

never got it in the EU due to the limited marketing potential.

Still, as impressive as the GBA had been throughout the first two years of its life, there was one thing holding it back — something that had been the bane of every Game Boy player's life for over 20 years.* That's right, the original GBA still didn't have a lit screen. All of that graphical beauty and all of these superb titles, and we were still unable to enjoy our games in anything but the most optimal lighting. The 2003 release of the new and improved Game Boy Advance SP (short for special) introduced, at last, a front-lit screen. But Nintendo also took the opportunity to completely redesign the handheld for the SP's release, trading in the wide, flat landscape design for a smaller, clamshell design that could be flipped open and closed, turning it into a neat square that could conveniently fold away — something that would go on to feature the next two generations of Nintendo handhelds. It came in Platinum Silver and Cobalt Blue, with the addition of Onyx in Europe and Japan, and featured a rechargeable battery as standard for the first time. The only bizarre design choice they made was to remove the headphone jack, meaning that if players wanted to use headphones, they'd need to fork out for a separate dongle to plug into the EXT2 charging port. Nintendo claimed this was a necessary omission to pack all the SP's internal hardware into the small case — but I think everyone would have preferred the device a few millimetres wider if that meant they could plug their headphones in without faffing around with adaptors. Nintendo logic, am I right?

Despite this hiccough, the SP was a favourite for consumers and, as a result, the GBA would continue to dominate the handheld space. 2003 also saw the release of *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire* globally (2002 in Japan), which would go on to become the GBA's best-selling game of all time at over 16 million units, closely followed by 2004's *Pokémon FireRed* and *LeafGreen* at 12 million units, and finally *Pokémon Emerald* at just over seven million units. Yeah, it was a good time for *Pokémon* fans and certainly a good time for The Pokémon Company and Nintendo. 2003 also saw the release of *Super Mario Advance 4: Super Mario Bros. 3*, the fourth and final game in the SMA series, as well as the first instalment of the turn-based *Mario & Luigi* series with *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga*, and another outstanding GBA *Castlevania* title with *Aria of Sorrow*. We were all eating well this year and everything looked solid for the GBA. But on Nov 13th, when Nintendo announced they'd be releasing a new handheld in 2004, the future suddenly seemed uncertain. Nintendo claimed it would not succeed the Game Boy Advance, but instead act as a "third pillar" for the console family. How realistic that statement was would remain to be seen.

Fortunately, the GBA had another strong year in 2004. Aside from the aforementioned superhit *Pokémon* games, we got a remake of the original *Metroid* with *Metroid: Zero Mission*, a superb entry into the *Mario Golf* series with *Mario Golf: Advance Tour*, and a first-class *Kirby* title with *Kirby & The Amazing Mirror*. Nintendo also tried something different with their Game Boy Advance Video Paks, a series of cartridges that contained videos of popular children's TV shows from Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, 4Kids, and Disney Channel, but also Nintendo and Sega IP like *Sonic* and *Pokémon*, and even some full DreamWorks movies like *Shrek* and *Shark*



043



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043
Game Boy Advance Jusco Edition
2001

045
Game Boy Advance Chobits Edition
2002

044
Game Boy Advance Target Red
2002

046
Game Boy Advance Spice Orange
2001



047



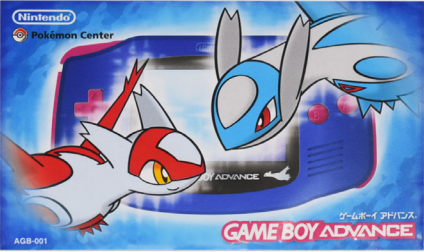
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049

047
Rockman Custom Edition
2001

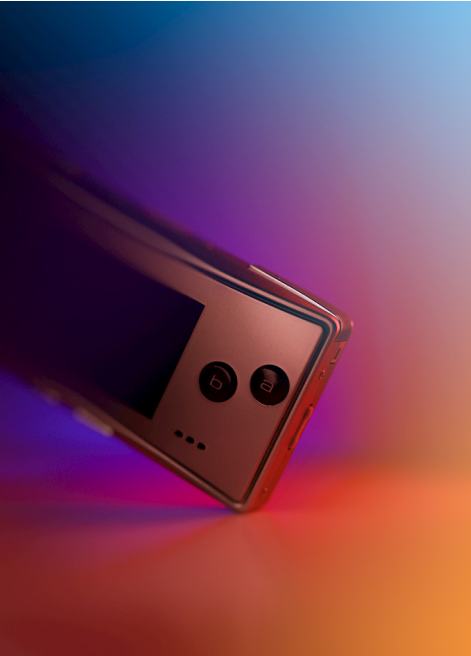
049
Pokémon Celebi Edition
2001



050

048
Pokémon Suicune Edition
2001

050
Pokémon Latios & Latias Edition
2002



051
Game Boy
Micro
2005

052
Game Boy
Advance SP
2003

Releasing globally in 2005 after the launch of the Nintendo DS, this was a Game Boy that truly lived up to its name. A tiny 4 by 0.7 by 2 inches, no console had ever felt so easy to carry around — heck, it would even fit in the back pocket of a pair of jeans. It was an incredible feat, still boasting a 42.48 mm by 28.32 mm screen that looked the business, and a backlight with adjustable screen brightness that bested even the AGS-101. Despite its size, it also felt remarkably comfortable to use, though certainly not for everyone. It came in a host of colours depending on region, but interestingly, this version of the GBA allowed you to remove and exchange faceplates, customising your Micro to your personal taste. However, the ability to play original Game Boy games was removed, and considering the Nintendo DS had a GBA port, it's fair to say that this was something that nobody needed, and the sales numbers made that apparent, topping off at 2.42 million units as of 2007. It will always be remembered though, at least for this writer, as the coolest thing Nintendo ever made.

Despite the DS' rude arrival in 2004, the inclusion of that GBA port meant that fantastic games kept being released for years to come, including some console high points like *The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap*, *WarioWare: Twisted*, and even the brilliant *Final Fantasy VI Advance* as late as 2007. The GBA was eventually discontinued in 2008, having sold an incredible 81.51 million units worldwide. The GBA series marked the final point in the illustrious history of the Game Boy, a series of handhelds we'd all grown up with and felt attached to. Though Nintendo was nervous to move away from its classic brand at the time, ultimately it was the right decision as the new DS line continued to smash sales records. It may have been the end of something great — dare I say perfect? But it's wonderful that we were able to end on such a beautifully high note. The GBA left a legacy of timeless titles that can be picked up and played today without the slightest feeling of datedness. Don't mind me — these are happy tears.

*Outside of Japan. Once again, they lucked out, scoring the Game Boy Light in 1998 that came with a backlit screen.



052

Tale. There were 35 released in total, coloured white to set them apart from the games. They were highly criticised for the lack of visual clarity — watching shows in 160p is never the way. But we're talking about a time when Netflix on mobiles didn't exist and portable DVD players were extremely expensive. So being able to watch anything on the go was an impressive feat. And let's be honest, having episodes of *Dexter's Laboratory* on your Game Boy Advance is bloody cool.

However, following poor GameCube sales, Nintendo felt the need to rebrand themselves — to push for innovation more than ever before. The Nintendo DS was going to do exactly that, but despite Nintendo's initial claims that the DS was to support the Nintendo family, the decision to include a GBA slot on the DS spoke volumes, and its release in late 2004/early 2005, depending on region — was effectively a death sentence for the GBA.

But, to say that Nintendo abandoned the handheld would be a mistruth. Even knowing that the DS was on its way, Nintendo released a backlit model of the SP (AGS-101) in 2004 in Japan and the US, finally giving us true visual clarity in any environment. We saw a very limited release in Europe in 2006, but as this was following the release of the DS, it was suitably a very small run of consoles [the controversial 'Tribal' design SP being one of them]. Finally, we saw one more complete redesign of the GBA. And this design has the right to two remarkable accolades in Nintendo history. It's both the last, and the sexiest, Game Boy ever made. I am talking about, of course, the Game Boy Micro.



053



056



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053
GBA SP Naruto Orange
2004

056
GBA SP Pikachu
2004

059
GBA SP Famicom Color Edition
2003



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057



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054
GBA SP Tribal Edition
2004

057
GBA SP Battle Royale Edition
2004

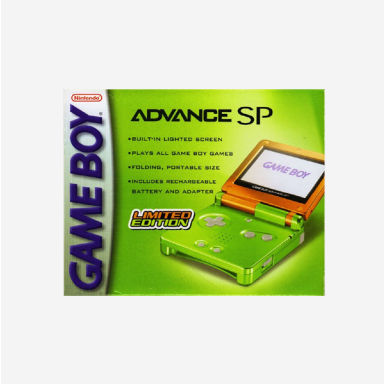
060
GBA SP Classic NES Edition
2004



055



058



061

055
GBA SP All Blacks
2004

058
GBA SP Kingdom Hearts Edition
2004

061
GBA SP Dual Orange/Lime Green
2004



062



064



066

062
Game Boy Micro Black
2005

064
Game Boy Micro Pink
2005

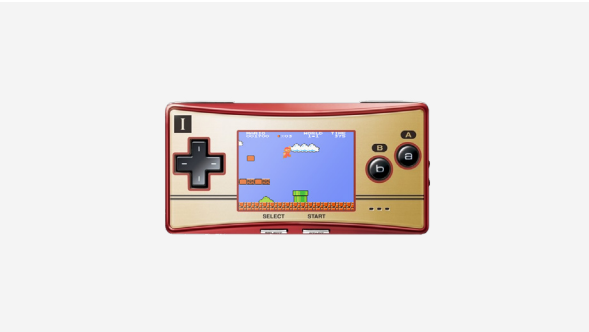
066
Game Boy Micro Final Fantasy IV Advance Bundle
2005



063



065



067

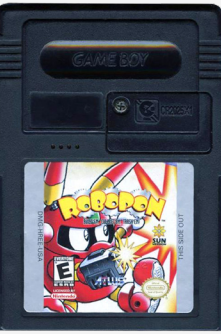
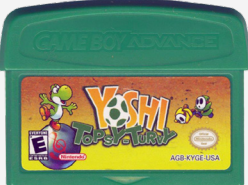
063
Game Boy Micro Pearl Blue
2005

065
Game Boy Micro Mother 3 Edition
2006

067
Game Boy Micro Mario 20th Anniversary Edition
2005

EVOLUTION OF GAME BOY CARTIDGES

There are many different variations of the Game Boy Game Paks. From clear Color carts to half-sized Advance ones, and from built-in rumble to solar sensors... let's take a look at some of the coolest carts around.

					
068	069	070	074	075	076
					
071	072	073	077	078	079
068 Game Boy Cartridge Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins 1989	069 Game Boy Color Cartridge Pokémon Gold 1998	070 Game Boy Advance Cartridge Final Fantasy V Advance 2001	074 GBA Solar Sensor Cartridge Boktai: The Sun is in Your Hand 2003	075 GBC Alarm Speaker Cartridge Tamagotchi: Osutchi & Mesutchi 1998	076 GBC Infrared Sensor Cartridge Robopon: Sun Version 1998
071 GBA Rumble Cartridge Drill Dozer 2005	072 GBC Rumble Cartridge Pokémon Pinball 1999	073 GBA Gyro Sensor Cartridge WarioWare: Twisted! 2004	077 GBC Crystal Cartridge Resident Evil Gaiden 2001	078 Game Boy Camera JP: Pocket Camera 1998	079 GBA Tilt Sensor Cartridge Yoshi Topsy-Turvy 2005



PARADISE BY THE OVERHEAD LIGHT.

You're in the backseat of a car on the last leg of a long road trip. You're on a Greyhound Bus, in the wee hours of the morning. You're just lounging around on a Sunday, afternoon light spilling in from the window. Your attention is on the screen in front of you — D-pad in the left hand, a scant few face buttons on the right. Your eyes are trained on the screen — simple graphics by today's standards, just some sprites and pixel art. Your eyes are also squinting — because there's no backlight for this handheld console. In the coming years, handheld technology will advance, and backlit screens will mostly eradicate the visibility issue that was for so long endemic to handheld gaming. But in this moment, preserved in the amber of history, handheld gaming means battling the elements and devoting your full focus just to see what's going on. These days are gone, but they were real once, and in their own way, they were beautiful.

Before we dive too far back into gaming's past and mythologise a technological limitation like it was some sort of intentional stroke of genius, let's take a moment and acknowledge some material realities. First and foremost, as with any study of technology from yesteryear, or indeed anything from one's younger years, we need to admit that nostalgia can be a powerful hallucinogen. From the cold perch of adulthood, anything from our simpler-seeming school days can seem practically unimpeachable. Anything that we latched onto while our brains were still solidifying can seem like a foundational text, whether it was actually of any quality or not. We're examining the original Game Boy, Game Boy Color, and Game Boy Advance here, and I won't pretend that I'm a superior being who can examine their own past with only the cutting insight of facts and logic. I wouldn't be writing this without at least a few swigs of nostalgia. But it's just the start of the study, not the end goal.

Second, I'm not arguing that portable gaming was better without ample illumination. It wasn't. It's better now. To allege otherwise would make me into, at best, some sort of willfully obtuse contrarian that stalks Twitter just to engage in bad faith bear-poking, and at worst a sort of game-playing ascetic who thinks that graphics can be too good, that UI can be too intuitive, and that the only way to enjoy games is to engage them at their most prickly and inhospitable — some kind of flagellating games priest who sees the act of gaming as an act of supplicance which must answer pleasure with pain. Playing games is easier now than it was before. Technology has progressed. But as we moved further and further into the modern age to where we are now, what exactly did we leave behind?

I won't pretend I'm immune to the way memory shifts and reshapes experiences, though. I have a rose-colored affection for the times when the dull screen was all I knew. Dependence on batteries and the telltale change of the Game Boy Advance's colour from red to green are similarly an experience that remains in the bones long after we moved into the era of rechargeable batteries. So I won't act like I liked un-backlit gaming, but I will admit that I do have an affection for it. That's what raised me, after all.

Before we get too lost in the memories, let's look at the historical context of these pre-lit platforms. The early Game Boy models didn't have internal illumination due to simple technological limitations. And it's not like the people at Nintendo and third-party vendors weren't aware of the visibility problem. There were attempts at fixes. They put out accessories like the worm light to try and overcome this hurdle, and results were mixed.

Building a handheld with internal light wasn't actually impossible in the late '80s, but it was impractical. The first major handheld console to include any internal lighting was 1989's Atari Lynx. The Lynx was a powerful machine for its time, and even had the unique quirk of being flippable for left-handed players. However, bloody are those

Blinded By The Light

It would take until 1998 for Nintendo to release a Game Boy with a backlit screen, but the Atari Lynx was the first console to feature this tech... in 1989!

that break down barriers, and the Atari Lynx carried a hefty price tag for all of its innovation. As a consequence, the Lynx didn't reach as many customers as a certain other, more affordable, handheld competitor. Nintendo's Game Boy would steal the show, becoming synonymous with handheld gaming for years to come. The Game Boy wouldn't get a significant visual aid until the release of the Game Boy Advance SP in 2003, leaving 14 years of squinting gamers.

While Nintendo likely could have moved a little faster to light up their handheld juggernaut, there's also some logic behind holding back. Considering the consequences of the Lynx's hefty price point, Nintendo chose to play it safe until such a time that they felt such a change would be financially feasible. A handheld screen won't be very visible at all if no one's buying it, will it?

So for those 14 years, roughly a generation and a half of Nintendo gamers had to make do with what they had. The appeal of a handheld gaming device is that it's portable — no longer stuck on the end of a cord plugged into a wall and hooked up to a TV. Portability is the whole selling point — play anywhere, anytime, on your own schedule and your own terms. But then again, exactly how portable is a console if it's barely useful without adequate visibility?

This same criticism about being useless in the dark also applies to books, which have been around a heck of a lot longer than video games of any kind. Kindles and other e-readers eventually came along to remedy that somewhat, but a good old-fashioned physical book is still just as dependent on external light as a classic Game Boy. Then again, there's the famously ill-conceived Game Boy Advance game *Boktai: The Sun Is In Your Hand*, which had a solar sensor that was necessary for play — you fought vampires by shooting them with energy from the real-life sun. The only problem was that, without internal lighting, direct sunlight would be just as obscuring to the GBA's screen as total darkness. So you could play a handheld game anywhere you wanted, any location you could go, so long as it wasn't in direct sunlight or in the dark. That's convenience!

All of these examples have been broad and rooted in design schematics and the history of portable gaming hardware. These are aspects of bygone handhelds that we can look back on with scholarly perspective, but really the reason I'm writing this essay, and the reason so many other writers in this volume had concrete ideas to speak on at length regarding the history of handheld gaming, is that I have a lot of memories associated with this. Most of those memories are in the backseat of the family car.

Riding in the car as a kid offered high risk and high reward. A road trip to visit family could mean hours of focused play time (like when I beat *Gunstar Super Heroes* in one trip), muddled occasionally by external hiccups like bumps on the road or your family trying to interrupt your flow state by telling you to put your shoes on and get out of the car — this is the last time we're stopping so you'd better use the bathroom and no we can't get anything from the snack machines. Then there were the hardware's own drawbacks, including dying batteries and the aforementioned problem of visibility.

Modern games discourse often circles around ideas like immersion, realism, and difficulty, and we can actually trace a curious path for how the old handhelds managed these three. You had to devote your entire attention to the Game Boy's screen if you wanted to make any progress. There could be no multitasking, no wandering attention. Your fellow travellers in the car would have to be fine without you — *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga* demanded a fealty that could not be denied. If you wanted to be able to manage anything on that screen, you had to be fully immersed in it. Many of us played these handhelds while we were younger, and we just admit that younger minds likely have an easier time leaving the rest of the world at the door and mentally zeroing in on the screen in front of them. Whereas nowadays I find myself having to juggle multiple devices and screens simultaneously, even when I'm trying to give a game my full undivided attention. I recall being able to slip into a digital fugue state for hours when I was a younger gamer. How much



Let's Give The Boy A Hand

The Handy Boy was an add-on aiming to correct every perceived problem with the Game Boy. It featured a magnifying lens, light, stereo speakers and more.

of this was because of my own brain, and how much of this was due to the fact that if I let my mind try to hold two thoughts at once, this run on *Donkey Kong Country 2* was as good as done?

In terms of realism, Game Boy consoles' fragile visibility didn't necessarily make their games more realistic as much as it kept the games rooted in a very clear reality. You could never forget where you physically were, where your real human body was taking up three-dimensional space. There was no easy fix to this variable other than changing where you were, shelling out real money for the Worm Light, or digging in your heels and making the most of it. I do have strong memories of forcing myself to play *Donkey Kong Country 2* on a late night drive back from a college football game, determined to clear one of that title's roller-coaster levels with only passing streetlights and the occasional bright red spotlight for guidance. I would pause the game during dark patches, meaning I was playing *DKC2* on a truly sadistic level of self-imposed difficulty. The alternative was not playing, and Nintendo had its hooks in me too deep for me to pass up the chance to finally beat this challenge — I honestly was even more determined to win because I would have to do so by playing in an almost stop-motion level of granular pauses and incremental progress. I had skin in the game, as it were. The fact that it would be more challenging only made the prospect of victory more appealing. The reality of the situation only served as something else for me to push against and want to overcome.

In this way, playing in such sub-optimal viewing conditions functioned as a sort of additional difficulty level — an external motivator to up your game. A Games Done Quick category for speedrunning older GBA games in direct sunlight

or lit only by a streetlight from within a parked car might not burn up the Twitch charts, but it would certainly lead to some creative play and some white-hot laser focus from anyone attempting the challenge. Like my harrowing experience in *DKC2*, difficulty, when it doesn't feel unjustly punishing or impossible to anticipate, can motivate players to keep at it and keep trying. Some games, like the turn-based JRPGs that flourished on the GBA, could basically be played with little mechanical friction — you would just need to be a little more patient in waiting to take your next turn once you could see what was going on. *Pokémon* didn't change all too much when taken from my room to the car's backseat, it just played at around half-speed. By contrast, platformers and racing games, any titles that require quick reflexes, would suddenly become extremely fraught affairs. Danger could come out of nowhere, from any angle, and you'd likely have no way of knowing short of sound cues or the frequent return of a Game Over screen. Better luck (or a shorter drive) next time!

There's an elephant in the room when we talk about players hurting for illumination in their parent's vehicles: the overhead light. That tempting, tantalising, forbidden overhead light. Maybe a parent would be lenient and let you turn it on while the car was stopped at a stoplight, but God forbid you flip the switch while the vehicle was in motion. To hear the drivers tell it, a passenger turning on a light inside the car was the same as blindfolding the driver. Before I could drive, I really thought that internal light sources at night would be a bigger threat to me as a driver — they're really not. That was just a different time, I guess.

Even with all of these hindrances — historical precedent, mechanical constraints, and game-hostile environments — these yesteryear handhelds still hold scores of positive memories for so many lifelong gamers. Nostalgia and the enthusiasm of long-lost youth make it easy to paper over how frustrating playing like this could be, but at the time, whether because we didn't know better or because we didn't care, we stuck with it anyway and we got some great games out of the bargain.

For this article, I picked up my girlfriend's vintage Indigo Game Boy Advance and played some *Donkey Kong Country*. The GBA is a lot smaller in my hands than it used to be, but it's still an ergonomically-sound little device. The problem was, I couldn't really see a thing, even in my well-lit apartment. Maybe handheld gaming was always a young person's game. I'm happy to have been able to play these titles and have these experiences in my younger days, but I can't pretend we should all go back. As far as handheld gaming went, the future really was brighter.

paradise by the overhead light.

Let There Be Light

The Worm Light was a common accessory for most Game Boy users from the Pocket onwards, with many companies producing their own version to get a slice of the market.





CAPTURED MEMORIES.

**The Game Boy is the device I think about when I picture myself gaming as a kid. Or the toy in general really — it stuck around for so long in its various forms that I can remember it in so many different places. I can vividly picture myself unwrap-
ping one and playing *Tetris* and *Kirby's Dream Land* one Christmas. A Game Boy Pocket followed, then a Game Boy Color. I even remember hunting for imported copies of *Pokémon Red* during the system's renaissance.**

In all its forms, but particularly its first and most iconic form, it is just so chunky and toy-like. So modular. Even putting a Game Pak in felt like adding an accessory, connecting the circuit with the magic on the cartridge, pushing it in and pulling it out with just the right amount of resistance. You can feel it now, can't you? It was as if the Game Boy couldn't bear to let go of each game. There was a wonderful physicality to it all, everything was just so satisfying to press and push, even down to the on/off switch being used to also lock in a game.

The system enjoyed a wide range of accessories. Most of us owned some form of light attachment — I had a little reading light that plugged in to let me play during night-time car journeys home. Or there was the magnifying glass that made the small blurry screen slightly less small and slightly more blurry (anyone that complains about the Switch's resolution clearly never grew up using a Game Boy). There was even the wonderfully named 'Handy Boy' that did it all — lights, magnifying glass, stereo speakers, an utterly pointless joystick, and chunkier buttons to sit over the already perfect inputs.

Other accessories were plain absurd, like an officially licensed sonar device made by Bandai, used while fishing (it was only released in Japan, alas). Sat somewhere in the middle on the spectrum of ridiculousness, probably more towards the "it does what?!" end of the scale, are the Game Boy Camera and Printer.

Released in early 1998, a few months before the Game Boy Color, it somehow helped to extend the Game Boy's unnaturally long lifespan even more than *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* already had. It was the first real consumer digital camera, particularly one that children could realistically own. Really, it was the world's first selfie camera — not that we called it that back then — letting you pull funny faces and see them on screen. It was a surreal thing, to see your humble Game Boy, until then only capable of displaying primitive graphics, showing you a pixelated version of yourself.

Back then, a digital camera would set you back hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds. The Game Boy Camera cost around £50 (with the Game Boy Printer coming in at around £60), making it an accessible entry point into digital photography, albeit a very basic one. It wasn't trying to create high-end photography, of course; not on a screen that could only display four shades of green. The picture quality is truly awful by today's standards, or even by 1998's to be honest. But that didn't matter, the images were still recognisable.

It was designed to let you and your friends take silly pictures of each other. Or perhaps for you to take embarrassing pictures of your older brother. Like Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone 2* with his Talk-Boy voice recorder device, to see a Game Boy Camera advertised was to imagine a world of possible fun applications for it — and it delivered! It was far better than it had any right to be.

Digital cameras were a form of high-end tech back then, and yet here was one that could plug into your humble Game Boy. Coming in a variety of colours to match the Game Boy Pocket, a chunkier than usual cartridge was crowned by a bulbous eye, which could rotate 180 degrees, taking pictures at any angle.

Who Are You Running From?

Choosing 'Shoot' from the Game Boy Camera menu screen would load a JRPG-type experience with multiple options to interact. Choose to run though, and a creepy, manipulated image of a face would appear...





PokéPrint

Players of *Pokémon Yellow*, *Gold*, *Silver*, and *Crystal* were treated to several Game Boy Printer features, such as printable Pokédex stickers and diplomas.

It worked continuously as you rotated it too, allowing for sneaky spy-like sideways photo-taking (something I note all-conquering smartphones can't do today – Round One to the Game Boy Camera). Swivelling it is, as with everything to do with the Game Boy, incredibly satisfying. It has just the right amount of resistance, softly locking into place at set angles before fully turning.

Inside the camera, the provided software is a treasure trove of wonder. It's so incredibly Japanese. Certainly, the zaniest Japanese thing I'd ever seen when I was younger. Turning it on sees a title screen with a photographed guy in a Mario costume dancing to a rave-like soundtrack. The whole package is so unapologetically silly, with menu after menu of idiosyncratic bizarreness. There is no common theme or design to any of the menu pages. It's like they've all been designed by different people working in complete isolation. There are menus that exist purely to host silliness — you select them just to be led to a funny picture and tune cul-de-sac. It makes me yearn for someone today to design a user interface with this anarchic approach. It's a game in itself, hosting hidden easter eggs and secrets, some things only appearing at random. Seeing Shigeru Miyamoto doing a silly dance hidden in the credits is one particular highlight.

But while it all seems chaotic and random, of course it isn't anything of the sort — this is Nintendo we're talking about here. The menus are a celebration of the ideas and creativity it's possible to achieve with digital photography. Nintendo is conveying to us the sense that this is no ordinary camera. It's not there to be used to take boring pictures that represent real life. This is digital photography! The world is your monochromatic oyster.

There are a huge number of ways you can play with the software. Filed under 'magic' (what else?) are the trick lenses, montage and panorama options. Using the trick lenses, you can experiment to create your own Andy Warhol-esque images, or distorted shots the kind of which were impossible before — this was decades before Snapchat's filters. The editing software allowed you to change pixel by pixel meaning if you had the patience, you could make something look however you wanted, allowing you to create our very own 'deepfakes'.

After you'd taken shots, you could apply fun frames, or doodle on them and apply stamps. We take this kind of thing for granted now, given the amazing cameras and editing software apps we carry about in our pockets every day, but there really was an excitement back then in being able to take a picture and then make changes to it. Even

the 'proper' digital cameras didn't let you make edits to your photos directly on the camera. Nintendo combined the camera with its Game Boy magic to create something wonderful.

It didn't stop there — there were a range of minigames too, each with playable characters that used your face in a variety of silly poses. The games were accessed in typically mad style; starting up a *Space Invaders*-style game gave you the option of shooting one of two aliens to then begin *Ball* or *DJ*. *Ball* is the classic Game & Watch game we've all seen before, while *DJ* was a music sequencer that let you mix beats and create your own terrible tunes — with your own face as the DJ, naturally. If you chose to ignore the two initial aliens they flew away, and *Space Fever 2* starts proper. If you then get a high enough score, you unlock a third game named *Run! Run! Run!*, where you have to face off in a race against a bird and a mole, jumping hurdles and furiously hammering the A-button like it's a *Mario Party* game.

If all that sounds convoluted and over-complicated, that's because it is. But it's also brilliant. What other software lets you start a game, and then immediately throws up an in-game option to shoot and go into another game? It's like something out of *Inception*. It makes no sense. It reminds me of the 3DS, which also had its own selection of strange built-in software; things some people will never see, nothing to do with the actual core purpose of the device but included anyway simply because it's fun. You can imagine someone at Nintendo chuckling to themselves as they came up with it, sneaking it in hoping no one else would notice until it was too late.

While the camera was plenty of fun already, Nintendo took it one step further with the companion Game Boy Printer device. The printer was Nintendo's way of smartly capitalising on the popularity at the time, particularly in Japan, of those photo booths where you and your friends could get your pictures taken and printed onto a sheet of mini stickers (remember those?). Once again, the quality was nothing like the real thing, but it was still good enough and, crucially, cheap enough to be a practical alternative that we could actually own.

Requiring a daunting number of AA batteries to power — genuinely, the original Game Boy and the Game Boy Printer would together need ten AA batteries between them — the Printer produced images onto a roll of thermal paper. This meant that, although the pictures faded over time, you thankfully didn't have to worry about buying ink. Upon being sent down the Game Boy Link Cable, the pictures slowly emerged, and once finished you'd tear them off against a row of teeth, like a till receipt. Naturally, the back of the prints could be peeled off so they could be used as stickers. This made it great fun for decorating your school books with stupid pictures of you and your friends, or sticking them all around your house to annoy your parents.

Away from the Game Boy Camera, the Printer also worked with a few games, which makes me wonder if this means Nintendo invented video game photo modes back in 1998? I think technically not, since games like *Link's*

Awakening DX and *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe* would only let you print pre-designed printer-compatible images you unlocked as an in-game reward. *Link's Awakening DX*, though, gave particularly charming cartoon interpretations of moments from the game, and really brought the game's graphics to life. Most of them were comic in nature, but a few were more poignant. As an obscure aside, the Switch remake of the game seems to have used the same art style found in these images. It's a fun bonus and a cool thought to think that these strange easter eggs are locked inside this increasingly rare hardware accessory.

In writing this feature, I naturally spent a bit of time with my Game Boy Camera and Printer in order to reacquaint myself. While any printouts have long since faded, it all still works. The camera still holds all the images, like a weird quirky time capsule. These are the earliest digital photographs I have, by quite some margin — it was probably seven or eight years later that I got my own digital camera when I was in my early twenties. Here are my teenage years, then, captured on my Game Boy. There are pictures of my old dog who died years ago, then still a puppy. Or my parents from 24 years ago, not far off the age I am now. School friends I haven't seen in over 20 years. A school trip to Spain; Barcelona's Las Ramblas captured in all its pixelated glory.

Seeing these photos again now, the impact is profound. These aren't like the old, printed pictures that were captured on film I have in a box somewhere — posed photos, back when a film contained a limited number of pictures that you had to pay to develop. These are shots I composed, mucked about with, edited, and added smiley faces to. These pictures feel so damn *personal*. Not only do they remind me of the things I was doing back then, they bring back my young teenage mindset, the stupid sense of humour, and how I saw the world.

The Game Boy Camera was unapologetically a camera for kids. It is a brilliant example of what makes Nintendo so special — combining hardware and software to create something that's affordable, fun, and unique. It is never not fun to take a picture of your parents, whack some googly eyes on them, and then print off a little sticker to stick somewhere they will find it. Twenty-four years later, while my iPhone may be able to record an image in mind-blowing quality, it still doesn't do it with one-tenth of the charm the Game Boy Camera pulls off.

The Game Boy feels like such an important item from my childhood, and with the Game Boy Camera's direct record of it, I've realised that's even more the case. We grow old and forget the past versions of ourselves. If we do look back, it's usually to cringe at how embarrassingly stupid we were. But here's a record of a 13-year-old me that I never appreciated even existed. Captured memories that are more than just photos. Playing around with the camera while writing this, I notice there are a few spaces left on the memory. On impulse I take a picture of myself to add to the end of the reel, wondering if in another 20 years' time they'll all still be there. I wonder if it'll take me back to this moment, writing these words for all of you, before I once again scroll through the memories of my childhood. My very own handheld history.



080



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POKÉMON (GEN 1).

Pokémon Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow sit at the combined top spot for the number one best-selling Game Boy game of all time with a staggering 46 million units sold worldwide since 1996. That’s right, the cute yellow electric mouse knocked *Tetris* off the top spot, before going on to replace Mickey Mouse as the most widely recognised cartoon character on the planet. And with *Pokémon Gold, Silver, and Crystal* also giving the almighty *Tetris* a run for second place, it’s easy to see why everyone has heard of Pikachu, Ash and his friends.

The game also has a Guinness World Record for the bestselling RPG as well — so basically, it’s just an all-round overachiever! With hindsight, it’s hard to see why Nintendo was so uncertain of the games chances of success initially — it was actually pretty ground-breaking in a number of ways for a global game franchise. Mixing RPG mechanics, creature collecting, and training elements as its core premise, *Pokémon* [a portmanteau for ‘Pocket Monsters’] was the brain-child of Satoshi Tajiri, inspired by his love of insect collecting as a child. He also wanted to heavily utilise the Game Boy’s link-up features to allow trading between players, which was a fairly ambitious concept at the time. To facilitate this, multiple versions of the game were created with different creature sets to encourage trading and increase replay value for players.

I watched *Pokémon* appear everywhere when it launched, the younger sibling of everyone I knew played the games, had the cards, and watched the cartoon. Despite not playing it myself, I absorbed a lot of information by osmosis and ended up watching the cartoon any day I was off sick from school (and later work!) as the colourful world and cute creatures seemed specifically designed to make you feel better [as long as you don’t think about the implications of kidnapping and training small magical animals to fight!].

But what’s it like to play? It’s often cited as the game that got people into RPGs as it’s very welcoming to newcomers and kids, with a simple story, fun gameplay, and an emphasis on exploration and battling. The mechanics are easy to learn but also have depth, which makes it an easy point to jump into for many people interested in the genre.

Pokémon also brought a cute Japanese creature aesthetic to the mainstream worldwide, to a level we haven’t really seen before or since. Originally there was pressure from the western localisation team that the designs should be ‘beefed up’ and made more aggressive for a western audience, but Nintendo refused, and sticking to their guns proved an incredibly wise move as the character designs are beloved by many who don’t even play the games.

I wouldn’t call myself a huge *Pokémon* fan, but I also might have run around the huge Pokémon Centre DX shop in Japan smiling like a kid, and I may or may not own a number of plush toys, t-shirts, and other merch adorned with my favourite Pokémon. There really is no escaping how lovable Pikachu and co. are!

TETRIS.

With 35 million sales since 1989, and a Guinness World Record for the most ported game — with official versions available on 65 different platforms — *Tetris* was, for many of us, the first Game Boy game we ever played. It’s a game that is as addictive and playable today as it was back then, with the *Tetris* brand still going strong and remaining influential.

Tetris is one of the simplest yet most skilful puzzle games ever devised. Rotate the shapes [Tetriminos], put them into the spaces, make lines, and get points. Sound simple? Well, in practice it proves to be anything but. I know this because I am objectively awful at two-player *Tetris* despite playing the game for a ridiculous amount of hours over my lifetime. There are so many tactics and moves that I’ve heard people talking about; it sounds like listening in on chess champions relaying their best plays, because in a lot of ways it is.

Tetris is something many of us think of as synonymous with the Game Boy, but its history is far longer and more complex. *Tetris* was created by a Soviet engineer called Alexey Pajitnov in 1984, who didn’t actually sell his own game or make any money until resecuring the rights in 1996, after it had already been sold on several platforms and had up to three companies thinking they had rights and licences for it at any one time. The game was one of several he developed after testing out the Electronika 60 computer and being inspired by a game in his childhood which used pentominoes. However, five-block pieces had too many variations so he reduced the size down to tetrominoes which had only seven variations. From there, *Tetris* started to form, and when he shared the first version with colleagues, it spread so rapidly and was played so much that the company banned it for interfering with productivity.

After expressing interest in working with publishers, the game followed a complex path to reach Nintendo who eventually met with him to figure out what was happening and secure the rights to use it on the Game Boy, and history was made. I highly recommend looking up the wonderful documentaries on its development, as it’s one of the most fascinating stories in gaming history to date — a game from Soviet Russia that conquered America (and the world) due to a shared love of puzzles. It might just convince you to dust off your Game Boy and give it another go, or download the latest version on Switch to see if you have what it takes to get on the leaderboards still.

080
Pokémon Red
1996

081
Tetris
1989



082



083

082
Super Mario Land
1989

083
Dr. Mario
1990

SUPER MARIO LAND.

The launch of the Nintendo Game Boy in 1989 was a revelation. All of a sudden, you could take your games library with you and play it anywhere (well, anywhere out of direct sunshine at least). I remember being fascinated by it being such a huge leap forward. I used to carry around those little water and ring toss games with their one-button functionality, had a small collection of Tiger Electronics LCD games, and now, all of a sudden, there was a whole 8-bit console I could carry around. I relentlessly borrowed the Game Boy that belonged to the kid next door to play outside, and he had ALL the gadgets to boot; headphones? Of course! Screen magnifier? Official! Fancy case for the cartridges? You bet! External speaker system with extended battery life & built in magnifier light? Well no, but I looked at those beasts that made your Game Boy so huge it probably couldn't be described as 'portable' anymore in the Argos catalogue like I'd just discovered you could buy your own spaceship for £25.

But the Game Boy was more than just its hardware and myriad of cool add-ons, it was also defined by its games. One game that many of us played when the Game Boy first released in 1989 was *Super Mario Land*. With over 18 million sales, it was the fourth highest-selling game on the system, with *Super Mario Land 2* just behind it in fifth place. *Mario* was a staple game for kids of the 8-bit portable generation. The Italian plumber was already established as the coolest game mascot ever, before a certain blue hedgehog burst onto the scene in 1991. It was definitely a franchise that I put a lot of time into myself, sitting outside on the grass with my borrowed Game Boy.

Super Mario Land was developed specifically to be a launch title to bring Mario to the Game Boy, making it the first portable console platforming game. *Super Mario Land* took a lot of inspiration and cues from 1985's *Super Mario Bros.*, however this was actually the first *Mario* game to not include its original creator, Shigeru Miyamoto. Perhaps as a result, there were some differences in style and gameplay compared to its home console siblings, which reviewers picked up on at the time, remarking that it set the game apart from the other games in the series. As a kid though, I didn't pick up on these things. Every new game was a new challenge, and being able to carry an entire Mushroom Kingdom around in my pocket was novelty enough to not really criticise the changes or the smaller playthrough time.

Super Mario Land was one of the *Mario* games I played the most as a kid, and the sound effects and the detail of the tiny sprites blew me away as I marvelled at them fitting so much onto a small screen — something I didn't mind so much since we still had a tiny black and white TV in the kitchen, so I was used to it. Games were progressing in leaps and bounds, and a full *Super Mario* game on a portable format was a sure-fire winner.

DR. MARIO.

The Game Boy was an 8-bit powerhouse of portable gaming that brought the joy of console gaming to any location. And, as much as I was a self-proclaimed Sega kid growing up, nobody can deny the long-term impact and the joy that playing Game Boy games brought to myself and so many other kids from the '80s to the present day — so many still grow up with a portable Nintendo console as their first or most used gaming system. To see so many titles from this era still living on to this day goes to show that these concepts are classic to us, and will be for generations to come. Perhaps one of these classic concepts is the one we're about to explore.

Mario has had many professions throughout the years, from plumber to tennis star. Besides being a hero to the Mushroom Kingdom, perhaps his most prestigious role was as a doctor in the 1990 Game Boy title *Dr. Mario*. The action puzzle game sold in excess of 5.3 million to become the 6th best-selling Game Boy game of all time.

How to describe *Dr. Mario*... Well, not satisfied with his plumbing business, Mario has gone out and gotten himself a somewhat questionable medical degree and is handing out pills as if he's running an illegal rave populated with dancing monsters. In all seriousness though, the medical and 'vitamin capsule' based imagery of the game was brought up on release (and on later ports and re-releases) as questionable by some reviewers and parents, however this didn't seem to hamper the game's success.

Released originally on Game Boy and NES, *Dr. Mario* is a colour-matching, falling-block puzzler that can be played single player or against a friend with a link cable and two Game Boys. It gets obvious comparisons to *Tetris* but actually has a pretty different game style as each piece has two colours and the goal is to remove all the viruses by stacking the same colour on their heads to erase them.

I loved *Dr. Mario* and played it regularly on both the Game Boy and NES — probably about as much as I played *Tetris*. The music was catchy (pun intended), and has even been remixed and reworked for use in *Super Smash Bros*. The game was adapted for the VS arcade machine too, as *Vs. Dr. Mario*, and had a sequel on the N64, as well as being re-released as a SNES collection with *Tetris*. It was even included on the NES/Famicom Mini from 2016.

Although *Dr. Mario* didn't have the same impact or the same legacy as *Tetris*, it's still a solid and fun action puzzler that's well worth a play, and one I have incredibly fond memories of as well. Between *Tetris*, *Dr. Mario*, and the reworked Puyo Puyo game *Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine* on the Sega Game Gear, a love of puzzle games exploded in my neighbourhood and it helped pave the way for many more games of its type to get a western release. *Dr. Mario* might be due a strike-off careerwise, but the game bearing his name was certainly a noteworthy title in the Game Boy's top selling list and its ongoing heritage.



PLAYING AS A WOMAN.

One only needs to take a glimpse around my house to understand just how passionate I am about video games. However, if you know me you will know that this is nothing new. In fact, all of my life I have been incredibly involved in the video game industry as a whole. Consuming news via every possible medium (including the almost forgotten video game magazine), spending all of my free time playing video games, working in video game retail as a teen and now, as an adult, both reviewing and writing about video games for numerous outlets. It is fair to say that gaming has always been a significant part of my life, and will continue to be for a long time to come. Whilst I now know many women who both enjoy video games and work in the industry; sadly, that was not the experience that I had growing up as a girl. That is not to say that I do not believe that there were as many women who enjoyed video games back when I was a child as there are now. I truly believe that there were always other women playing, just like myself, but the lack of representation made it harder to become involved in the industry at large.

Have you ever looked back at a period of time in your life and realised that a particular moment was a significant experience that fundamentally changed your outlook on a certain topic? It may have been a huge moment filled with triumphant fanfare and applause, but equally as likely it was a small moment that resonated with you in such a way as to alter your perception going forwards from that moment on. For myself, it was when I first obtained *Pokémon Crystal* and inserted it into my well-loved Game Boy Color. Prior to this I unashamedly loved *Pokémon Silver* (and still do to this day) as by the release of *Pokémon Crystal*, I had already spent over 300 hours in the game — restarting, completing the PokéDex, breeding shinies, and battling my cousins whenever I visited them.

Games that have captivated me in the way that the second generation of *Pokémon* captivated me as a child have been few and far between since, although *Final Fantasy XIV* is certainly up there. Even compared to the enormous scale of *Final Fantasy XIV*, I still do not believe that I am enamoured quite to the same extent that I was with the wondrous region that is Johto. Thus, I knew that I would enjoy the next game in the series, which was kindly gifted to me. In those long, dark days before the internet was in my pocket, I had no prior knowledge of the game until I had received it. So, imagine my surprise when I was finally able to boot it up and begin my journey. As the third game in the generation, it clearly felt immediately familiar as, after *Pokémon Yellow*, it was obvious that this would be more-or-less the same game as the pair that had come before it, with a few quality-of-life upgrades. It was not long into the game's introduction, though, that I was met with a simple question that stopped me in my tracks.

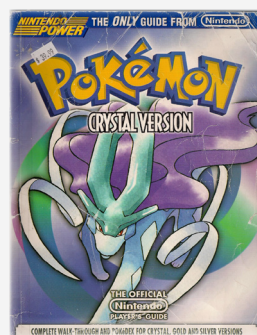
“Are you a boy or a girl?”

A simple sentence that initially caught me off guard and yet had so much meaning to me. It was such a minor change to the game. A second character model, a few pronoun changes here and there, and a name. That is all it took to include half of the planet's population and allow them into the world of *Pokémon*. Yet, it was, and still remains, a big deal.

Looking back at this moment, I can clearly see how it changed the way that I thought about video games and how a lack of inclusion led to the difficulties I faced navigating a hobby that, from the outside, was perceived to be quite heavily dominated by men. One of the realisations that impacted me the most was just how shocking the variety of things that a person will often take for granted as ‘just the way it is’ due to the fact that it is widely accepted as the norm. This is often the case even though change would be incredibly beneficial to all. The status quo seems hard

Guided Play

Printed game guides were incredibly popular in the '90s and '00s, especially for sprawling titles like *Pokémon*.



Girl Power

Produced by the celebrated Gunpei Yokoi, *Metroid II: Return of Samus* also featured a female protagonist, and would go on to be remade for the 3DS as *Metroid: Samus Returns*.

to shake off. I had never even questioned the fact that, for the most part, men were always the central character in the vast majority of games that I had encountered. It was just the way that it was. It was all that I had known, and as a young girl I already had that mindset imprinted on me just by being surrounded by male-led video games. From the moment that I chose to play as a girl in *Pokémon Crystal*, everything changed.

I had just accepted the status quo that I had to play as a man, even when the sex of the character was not fundamental to the story, as is the case with Pokémon trainers. Admittedly, I saw it all around me; in movies, professional sport, and high-profile jobs. All of these things had one sad thing in common — there were hardly ever women in these roles and it was not something that was being challenged, or at the very least it was not being openly challenged as everyone around me seemed to happily exist with the way that things were.

As I began my journey to become a Pokémon master, I was delighted as my female trainer — known as Kris — chose her Pokémon, confidently beat her male rival and then started on her own adventure. I was in awe! I wanted to be just like her. I told everyone in my family and at school who would listen that I could be a real Pokémon trainer now; it wasn't just for boys. A male relative of mine also received *Pokémon Crystal* and also chose to play as Kris, and yet his experience was so far removed from my own. It was quite obvious that due to learned behaviours and societal expectations that we had both been exposed to up until that point in our lives that we would both view this experience differently, through no fault of our own, and no experience was any more correct than the other. However, whilst my eyes were open to the excitement of possible equality in a hobby heavily marketed towards men and the male gaze as a whole, my male cousin was amused by the sheer novelty of being able to play as and observe a female character.

When I look back now it seems astounding that two similarly aged children could have such a profoundly different reaction to such an easy change in a video game. It clearly illustrates how meaningful representation is across the board and how continued representation beyond the sex of the main character needs to be a priority until it is the norm. For the majority, it may not make a difference at all but for the group that is included it can change their whole outlook, as it did mine.

I will always remember this moment as the turning point in my video gaming experience. Gone was the acceptance that this was 'just the way it was', that I was an outsider who enjoyed

the hobby but that I did not really belong. Over the next couple of years, I still mostly played as a male character, since it was still more often than not the sole option in the majority of video games that I played. I would always be excited whenever a development team included a female character though, and I would always jump at the option. It was a huge selling point! Over time this change snowballed, and now as I write this in 2022 with two young daughters of my own, there are a plethora of amazing female leads in some of the most popular video game series.

Over time, it has become more accepted and there is less resistance to a game which only has a woman as a lead character. Even now I can still remember some of the many comments online when *Final Fantasy XIII* was revealed to have Lightning as the main protagonist. However, now it is generally expected that most games without a story-driven lead will give you the option to choose male or female when you create your character. My eldest daughter, who is now five years old, is just beginning her own journey into video games and is having a vastly different experience to that of my own — this is something that I do not take for granted. Strong women taking leading roles in media and society at large is a great reflection of what I teach her in our own home and should be what everyone is witness to in our society as a whole.

As I mentioned earlier, as a child I was just excited to play as a girl for the first time and now I wonder if it had never happened and I was never presented with that opportunity; would I still have continued to be okay with the status quo? Would it just be accepted still? There is no doubt in my mind that *Pokémon Crystal* was the pivotal moment in me realising that women deserve equal representation in video games, as well as the respect of their male counterparts in the broader industry and community as a whole. As a child, seeing myself represented in something that I held dear gave me the confidence to involve myself in discussions when the boys in my classroom were talking about video games, and as an adult the continued representation and opportunities presented to women allow me to continue to feel confident in an industry that, even as I write this today, can often seem like it is bogged down by archaic and sexist opinions both behind boardroom doors and publicly on social media. There have been many moments where I have been harassed both online and in my day-to-day life due to my involvement with video games, but I now have the confidence to get past those moments and still involve myself with what makes me happy.

It is clearly evident that things have changed significantly from when I was a young girl to today. The experiences that I have had over the years are ones that I daresay will not

be the same as young girls have now. I can remember how excited I was to first play *Pokémon Crystal* as a woman and whilst this is now standard practice and women in society may not experience that emotion in the exact same way — I am happy that it has become normalised to the point of not being such a momentous occasion as it was for me. I do believe that there is still change needed to make sure that women are treated equally and respected in this industry, but don't get me wrong, I am forever grateful for the change that has already taken place that has allowed me to fully participate in the most engaging and rewarding hobby that one could possibly partake in — as a woman.

My experience relates directly to the representation of women in video games but yet my hope is that every child and adult out there experiences that same moment where they see themselves represented. That they look at the screen and see someone looking back at them who they identify with, not just regarding their sex but beyond that, to the likes of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, and everything in between. Representation matters, especially today, and we need to do more to include everyone. Every person is different and that difference is beautiful. It should be cherished, and if video games can give someone the same feeling that I experienced as a young girl, that is something that should absolutely be celebrated. I, for one, will always love that a small green handheld console that relied on two AA batteries was able to, in many ways, change the way I perceived myself and my place in the world — and helped shape me into the woman that I am today.

A Game Of Firsts

Pokémon Crystal was the first title in the series to play only on the Game Boy Color, being totally incompatible with the original, Pocket and Light models.



084

085

084
Pokémon Crystal
[Game Boy Color]
2001

085
GBC Crystal Blue Cartridge Pokémon Crystal
[Game Boy Color]
2001

playing as a woman.

KING OF KONG.

Mario vs. Donkey Kong

Starting on the Game Boy Advance with Mario vs. Donkey Kong, this puzzle platform series spanned several games and consoles. Wind-up Mini Marios featured in many of the games, as shown in our beautiful image to the right!



086



087

086
Mario vs. Donkey Kong
JP packaging
[Game Boy Advance]
2004

087
Mario vs. Donkey Kong
NA packaging
[Game Boy Advance]
2004



One of the biggest success stories of the home console market during the 1990s was Rare — their output with Silicon Graphics (SGI) workstations allowed the Super Nintendo to display unparalleled detail thanks to the creation of 3D computer-generated models, with the caveat that these models be compressed and downscaled to a fraction of their original beauty. This wasn't for naught though, as these visuals created Donkey Kong's new identity and were a backbone of the series' marketing from *Donkey Kong Country* onward.

This worked well enough for consoles but Rare were ambitious and loved testing themselves, thus a challenge was raised. Could these same computer models be put into an 8-bit handheld system?

Rare's first handheld *DK* game was initially conceived as a direct port of *Donkey Kong Country*, but the plan changed to make it an entirely new story which happens to use the same assets, in conjunction with new ones made specifically for this new adventure. This was all contextualised by the game's story which, in a very tongue-in-cheek way, laid out what the game was. The manual states *Donkey Kong* wouldn't be successful if it was on a Game Boy, and the titular Kong himself refutes this by setting out on this challenge to prove he didn't need to rely on the fancy graphics of a home console on his journey through *Donkey Kong Land*.

While Rare's *Donkey Kong* handheld debut functioned as expected and was for all intents and purposes a game that truly pushed the hardware, the critics he tried to prove wrong had some points. This wasn't just compressing things down to 8 bits; this was monochromatic too, with only four shades of green bleeding together on the original hardware. *Donkey Kong Land* was practically unplayable on a Game Boy, though this was alleviated with future backlit handhelds and the Super Game Boy for the SNES which allowed the visuals to be properly appreciated.

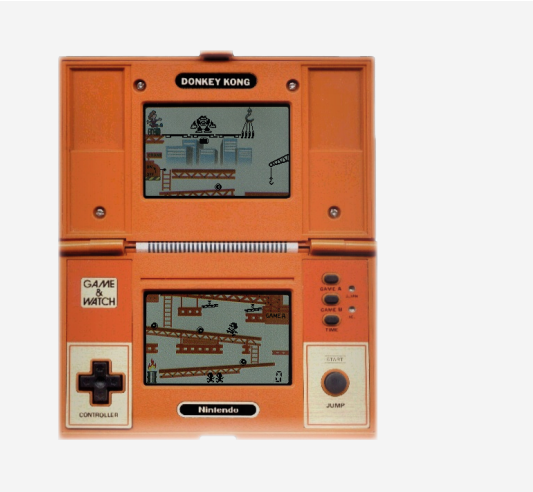
But even with those methods, the detailed backgrounds and sprites still bleed together, though are at least more visible thanks to the better screens. *Land* was almost certainly made because they *could* and not because they *should*. The limits of what could be rendered on a Game Boy were pushed, which led to the iconic tag-team duo of Donkey and Diddy being split up, the handheld only displaying one Kong at a time instead.

Yet for all its faults, this game did as much as it could to feel different from its more complex counterpart on home consoles. Level environments and theming not touched in the original were used here, whether they be previews of stages that the upcoming *Donkey Kong Country 2* would use such as pirate ship levels, or themes never again revisited by this series like the final world, Big Ape City; a more urban environment complete with blimp stages to set it apart from the jungle beginnings. *Donkey Kong Land* was a charming title that showed the efforts of a team that wanted to do more than the bare minimum, even if it was generally worse for its meticulous detail and arguably shouldn't have been anywhere near an original Game Boy.

Rare seemed to have learnt from *Land*'s deficiencies as the sequels to it, *Land 2* and 3, are much improved, yet still retain the iconic SGI visuals that were synonymous with Donkey Kong in the mid-1990s.

Unfortunately, these two sequels serve more as remixed ports than out-there new entries capable of taking the franchise to unexpected places. This is especially the case for *Land 2* which could be mistaken for a port of *Donkey Kong Country 2* given that almost every level re-uses a name from the console counterpart — although the actual design is new and worthy of being its own separate game, even if déjà vu repeatedly strikes.

While it's lacking in terms of uniqueness, everything relating to the game feel has been tuned up significantly. The physics are closer to where



088



089



090

088
Donkey Kong console
[Vertical Multi Screen Game & Watch]
1982

089
Donkey Kong box
[Vertical Multi Screen Game & Watch]
1982

090
Donkey Kong Jr.
[New Wide Screen Game & Watch]
1982

Donkey Kong Game & Watch

The second release in the Vertical Multi Screen Game & Watch series (the first was *Oil Panic*), 1982's *DK-52* was the most successful dual-screened game released on the format, selling around 8 million copies.

they should be, and even more enjoyably, the graphics strike a better balance between letting the player see what's happening, and still being unmistakably *DKC*. This is due to the more subdued backgrounds. This may not be to everyone's taste since it is still harder to make out some details than it would be with more traditionally rendered games for this hardware, but *Donkey Kong Land 2* achieves the lofty goal the first game set. And to help lessen the clutter, the Kongs now transform into their animal buddies instead of just riding them as they did before.

To most fans of the series, the *Land* trilogy came to an end with the Game Boy's 1997 hit *Donkey Kong Land III* which added nothing new except for the Roman numerals not present previously. This is the *Country 3* version of what *Land 2* accomplished, though with less shameless copying. While it's a great game that is possibly the best of the trilogy due to the lessons learned from previous iterations, it wasn't doing much new.

But for Japanese fans, the wait for the third entry was significantly longer, not arriving until the year 2000. However, that delay led to something amazing — it introduced the series to the Game Boy Color, which finally brought this monochrome series to life.

Enemies and the backgrounds no longer clash as they don't share the same limited tints anymore, and playability is further improved as the more robust hardware of this Game Boy revision means slowdown is less persistent. It is, in many ways, the definitive version of this game, and a great precursor of what was to come, though some animations are missing which does slightly dampen this otherwise phenomenal way to cap off the *Land* series.

A few months after the Japanese release of *Donkey Kong Land III*, a much more impressive feat was accomplished. In November 2000 Rare graced the world with *Donkey Kong Country* for Game Boy Color, a full remake of the 6-year-old technological marvel from console. It wasn't uncommon for 8-bit games to see remakes for Game Boy, but Rare were nothing if not innovators, and the envelope was pushed with not just any 16-bit title, but one of the most technologically impressive games to date.

In order to accomplish this, a lot of changes were implemented, with the most obvious being the downgraded visuals and music. And while not as obvious, the physics were adjusted too, although this was more a side effect of the entirely new engine that was created just for this game. Much like the *Land* games, the Kongs only appear one at a time, and animal buddies work as transformations. Yet this

wasn't just a lesser version of the 6-year-old console release. *DKC* for GBC has so many new additions that it certainly outdoes the predecessor in terms of the amount of content, and if it wasn't for the less precise physics this could have been held up as a definitive release in terms of gameplay. As it stands now it is just a neat curio, but one that deserves to be fondly cherished.

An entirely new level was added for this release, and a surprisingly short and uneventful level from the original was extended to make it feel more substantial. These two massive improvements have been left stranded on the handheld release as no other re-releases of *Donkey Kong Country* have ever used these. One of the best improvements in this remake is the game saving after every level, which cuts down on the tedium of the original release. Candy Kong now offers harder challenges since her role as a save point was made redundant.

This isn't the only recontextualised Kong, as Funky now offers a fishing minigame and Cranky offers one based on shooting targets. These are fun distractions that add extra value to this package even if they're only minor additions. But the most minor of the additions is the Game Boy Printer functionality. Collectable stickers in-game are able to be printed, which is a charming feature that only this hardware could bring to life.

The year 2003 saw the release of *Donkey Kong Country* remade again, only this time for Game Boy Advance. This is a much more faithful port of the original than what came before, however, it isn't without its quirks. A lot of the original files had become lost or were hard to salvage the required information from. As a result, this remake was coded from scratch with the help of a SNES emulator, which allowed the artists to assess the game one frame at a time and disable layers to get better views of the environments. Even accounting for this setback, the GBA remake looks undeniably different from the original, and that's because of the hardware itself. While the GBA was more powerful than the SNES and could outperform it in most areas, it was still a small handheld with a screen that was hard to see. Everything had to be made more visible for this non-lit display which in turn led to more washed-out colours. It was a necessity and did a lot to avoid the mistakes of the original Game Boy game, but when played on any of the backlit successors this enhanced remake does look more unpleasant.

At least this remake was able to add an opening cutscene that was planned for the original game but was only displayed via text in the manual. This addition helped to make the

story feel more substantial even if it is about a crocodile stealing bananas. Much like the previous remake, there are a lot of quality of life improvements and additional side objectives sprinkled in to add value.

The remaining two *Country* games were remade for GBA as well, and since they built off what the first did, the physics better matched the original with each iteration. The second *DKC* had less that needed fixing and most of its changes are carried over from the previous game such as the different visuals and physics. This version’s single new boss was a nice precursor to what came next.

DKC3 for GBA, while a contentious version of the most contentious game of the trilogy, did do a lot to separate itself from the pack. Much more content was added, which makes this the most robust of the remakes. This included an entirely new world featuring seven exclusive levels, which, combined with the most refined *DKC* physics for this platform, puts it head and shoulders above the rest of the pack. In addition, an entirely new soundtrack was composed for the game that unfortunately outright replaces the original score due to storage limitations. This is a nice treat though, which better fits the atmosphere of the earlier two games, even if it doesn’t always mesh as well with this game’s different feel.

Unfortunately, this was the end of Rare’s tenure with the *DKC* franchise. They were purchased by Microsoft in 2002, and while free to make games for Nintendo’s handhelds, they weren’t able to do anything on Nintendo’s home consoles. It was the home console market Nintendo wanted to push Donkey Kong onto again since the *Country* series hadn’t seen the light of day there since 1996, and while other games in the franchise released sporadically on home consoles since, there wasn’t a cohesive theme or company to shepherd the series.

Enter Retro Studios, who put out the next main title in the franchise, *Donkey Kong Country Returns*. It was originally made exclusively for the Wii in 2010, and much like Rare’s games was a testament to what could be accomplished on limited hardware. It was a beautiful game that ran at a consistent 60 frames per second and still holds up today if upscaled to a higher resolution.

Only three years later this game that stressed the Wii was ported to the significantly weaker 3DS. This should have been an impossibility but this series was used to technical challenges. Instead of being handled internally at Retro, this port was offloaded to Monster Games who would eventually help co-develop the next main entry in the series.

While fundamentally the same game as its Wii counterpart, this rendition is no less a technical marvel and arguably the game’s definitive release. An entire extra world was added, easier difficulty options were included and the controls are much more traditional instead of relying on the waggle of the Wii Remote. However, as a 3DS game, a lot was compromised. Some compromises are only minor, like the lack of some idle animations that were originally present, but some do harm the game more significantly. Obviously, the visuals are toned down

which was to be expected, but the frame rate received a similar alteration. Instead of the 60fps joy of before, this version struggles to reach 30fps. To some, this is a deal-breaker, but considering what hardware this game was ported to, it’s frankly amazing it is as playable as it is.

And while not as herculean a task, the first portable version of a high-definition *Donkey Kong* showed up on the scene with the port of *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* for Nintendo Switch in 2018. This is a very faithful port of the Wii U original from 2014, but it also serves as the first instance of a portable *Donkey Kong* port being, without a doubt, the best way to play the classic game.

The earlier games were either made for hardware that couldn’t do the games justice, like the *DKC* for Game Boy Color or *Returns* for 3DS, or they were like the GBA ports which added a lot of new content but also changed the visuals to better accommodate the hardware, losing something in the transition. The games mentioned earlier are some people’s preferred ways of experiencing these jungle japes, but just as many will decry them.

Tropical Freeze for Switch, however, has the luxury of being made for a portable that is more powerful than the console it was originally conceived for. The target frame rate of 60fps is still met in handheld mode, the graphics remain pristine and the load times are so significantly improved it puts the original Wii U release to shame.

In spite of all this, it’s also in some ways the least interesting *Donkey Kong* experience on the go. The other versions have drawbacks or changes that give them their own identity. *Tropical Freeze* is just the Wii U game only better, with the only changes of note being very minor visual alterations and a playable Funky Kong to round out the roster.

A portable game being just the same console game on the go is arguably what we’ve always been building up to over the decades, though. The Kongs finally made it. Starting off as different shades of green getting lost in the overly detailed darker green environment, to being facsimiles of their original selves with less detail, to eventually making it to a lower resolution direct port with a lower frame rate and finally reaching their true potential. This series has battled technological hurdles at every opportunity and will hopefully continue that legacy.

Origins Of Donkey Kong

Created by Nintendo royalty, Shigeru Miyamoto and Gunpei Yokoi, Donkey Kong started life as an arcade game, released in 1981. The game was developed as a rival to the popular Namco title Pac-Man.



091



092



093



094

006
Donkey Kong
[Game Boy]
1994

008
Donkey Kong Country
[Game Boy Advance]
2003

007
Donkey Kong Land
[Game Boy]
1995

009
Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D
[Nintendo 3DS]
2013



095



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METROID FUSION.

Life’s circumstances sometimes result in entertainment media being experienced not in the order that was intended. I saw *Return of the Jedi* before I had seen *The Empire Strikes Back* (yes, I was the only person at the screening to leave the cinema in shock that Darth Vader was, spoiler alert, Luke Skywalker’s father), and likewise, *Metroid Fusion* was my first experience of a *Metroid* game. I was unaware of what a nuisance Space Pirates and Metroids had been for Samus Arun on the Game Boy, NES, and SNES, because those games had eluded me; at the time I was glued to my Commodore Amiga. Thankfully though, *Fusion* was a solid starting point in the adventures of Samus for two reasons. It’s a brilliant game of course, but additionally, its relatively linear structure and the nudges from AI mastermind Adam to indicate where to go next, ensured a *Metroid* newbie like me could find my bearings and become thoroughly addicted to the series. By extension, this fuelled my fascination with the Metroidvania genre itself (the term being a mash-up of *Metroid* and *Castlevania*). Those first steps on planet SR388 have resulted in a love of the genre that has gone on to provide solid gems such as *Hollow Knight*, *Axiom Verge*, and *Salt and Sanctuary*.

Metroid Fusion arrived on the Game Boy Advance the same week that *Metroid Prime* landed on the GameCube, a double-barrel of Samus-flavoured entertainment that took our heroine on new 2D adventures in *Fusion*, and — in a first for the series — into 3D with *Prime*. The former may have lacked the ground-breaking nature of the latter, but it nevertheless gave players an entertaining adventure featuring a relentless parasite — the SA-X, which is able to mimic Samus — and a gripping storyline woven into a mission that offered just the right level of challenge. Some of the boss battles tested my skills: from the erratic spider Yakuza to the relentless (and aptly named) Nightmare, these were superb examples of being repeatedly defeated but finding yourself diving right back in for another attempt at victory.

I savoured every moment of *Metroid Fusion*; its gripping storyline was too good to leave unfinished. Each zone in the game is visually distinctive, and Samus Arun’s various upgrades throughout provide a satisfying sense of progression (indeed, Metroidvanias in general offer a real buzz when attaining a new upgrade, with the realisation that those previously inaccessible areas logged in your brain are suddenly available to you). The concoction of different bombs, beams, and missiles is a pleasing plaything against the parasite-infested enemies.

It’s worth noting that *Metroid: Zero Mission* is an equally worthy experience on the GBA. But where *Zero Mission* serves up a revisited, upgraded take on the original NES *Metroid*, *Fusion* is an entirely original release. Chronologically, the events of *Fusion* take place prior to *Metroid Dread* on the Switch, so if you haven’t boarded the B.S.L. yet, it’s not too late to fill in a gap in the series’ storyline. *Metroid Fusion* still plays like a dream, despite some nightmarish boss battles.

WARIO LAND 4.

Wario leads a rather chaotic existence. While Mario’s 2D platform outings tend to have the plumber exploring within familiar parameters while following a conventional route (literally, with his insistence on travelling to the right), a *Wario Land* game offers an adventure filled with varied objectives and a barrage of quirky transformations for the Titular character. Puffy Wario, Flaming Wario, Fat Wario (yes, *Fat Wario*): they don’t sound the most practical of physical alterations, but these changes offer access to previously unreachable areas, and are an essential part of completing a level. Wario also benefits from a Dash Attack which, while lacking the elegance of Mario’s neat hop onto enemies’ heads, still manages to provide enough brute force to smash through the opposition and indeed any nearby walls, often revealing a stash of gold coins. Uncovering a hidden room by piling through the wall is a satisfying exercise that’s perfectly suited to Mario’s arch-rival. You get the impression that Wario is enjoying every moment.

Yes, it’s all about the cash, of course, when it comes to Wario. The game leads him through a pyramid filled with riches. Each eccentrically designed 2D level hides a key to unlock the next stage, as well as four stones that provide access to a boss battle. Unlike Mario’s exploits, there is no timer for the player to concern themselves with; until, that is, you find each level’s bizarrely appropriate frog switch. Leaping on this activates the exit warp hole, and a countdown timer to reach it. This combination of a relatively sedate exploratory pace followed by a panicked rush to the exit works a treat and provides more of a contrast to the gameplay mechanics of a *Mario* game.

And the Game Boy Advance isn’t short on those. The *Super Mario Advance* series brought classic releases to the handheld, including *Super Mario World* and Yoshi’s Island, both classics deserving of an appearance on a handheld. But *Wario Land 4*’s arrival on the GBA is important because it offered a completely new first-party platforming experience on the console. Early in the Advance’s existence, there was some criticism about a lack of new content, and so releases such as *Wario Land 4* helped to balance the gaming library. That the game was filled with such riotously odd content was a bonus.

It was, in fact, the first game I played on my original Glacier Game Boy Advance, as my girlfriend at the time had bought the game for me, alongside the console itself, for my birthday that year. *Wario Land 4* feels more accessible — for better or worse — than its original Game Boy and Color predecessors, perhaps because of the easier learning curve to conquer. There’s a rich variety of locations, boss encounters, and minigames; it’s an enjoyable platformer that I still relish returning to. And the girlfriend that gave me *Wario Land 4* is now my wife! Why *wouldn’t* you marry someone who bought you a Wario game for your birthday?!



097



098

ADVANCE WARS.

Now here's a game that is unequivocally the complete package, ideal for gaming on the go. *Advance Wars* is a turn-based strategy game played out on a grid of distinctive terrain including roads, rivers, forests, and mountains. These locations each influence your offensive and defensive capabilities, as do any buildings your troops capture. A city restores HP to ground units, while ports and airports can do the same for sea and air units, respectively. Bases are also invaluable, as they can deploy new additions to your military. If you eradicate the opposition's army or claim their headquarters, victory is yours.

The campaign gradually introduces new units and tactics, with objective-based scenarios that ensure a variety of skirmishes. The odds during each mission are initially stacked against you, but clever use of the terrain combined with careful analysis of each unit's strengths and weaknesses can transform your prospects for success. Mobile artillery, for example, can pick off units from a distance but are vulnerable to close-range attacks from tanks, while battleships are lethal to challenge, unless one of your submarines concealed beneath the waves can sneak closer and strike. There's a dense amount of information to hand on-screen, but it's presented with such clarity that any tactical missteps are down to human error, not a lack of data. Even the sound effects that accompany every menu selection and troop movement offer intuitive audio cues.

Another factor to consider is the special abilities of your commanding officer, as well as those of the opposition's CO. Timely use of their unique special commands can decisively sway a battle. The Orange Star CO, Andy, who is your first point of control in the campaign, can restore 2 HP to each damaged unit for instance, while Green Earth's CO, Eagle, can add a temporary attack and defence boost to his helicopters and aeroplanes. There's enough variation with each CO that it's worth experimenting to find which suits your tactical style. All these years later, I'm still discovering nuanced detail to each commanding officer. In that respect, *Advance Wars* seems to age like a fine wine; it should be noted, in fact, that in 2013 *Edge* magazine retroactively awarded the game ten out of ten, a rise from the nine it had originally given the game 12 years earlier.

Advance Wars is my desert island video game, the title that's elevated above all other video games I have ever played. Give me a Game Boy Advance and a copy of *Advance Wars*, and I potentially have an infinite number of hours ahead of me filled with unbridled entertainment, glued to the screen as I coordinate my troops against the enemy. With over 100 battlefields and the option to design your own, there is limitless potential. *Advance Wars* is, for me anyway, the most essential GBA release. There have been enjoyable sequels since that have played with formula, but the original game had the formula perfectly pitched. It's as intrinsic to the console as *Tetris* is to the original Game Boy — a flawless pairing of software and hardware. What an impeccable strategic move by Nintendo.

MARIO KART: SUPER CIRCUIT.

The appearance of a *Mario Kart* game on a portable device was a significant moment in gaming history. We had already experienced the thrills of *Super Mario Kart* on the SNES and its N64 sequel, but the diminutive Game Boy Advance served up *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* with a roster of familiar playable characters, a higher course count than both previous games combined, and — with the aid of a link-up cable — a multiplayer mode that offered karting fun no matter where you were. It was the complete package on a handheld, with a selection of game options including Grand Prix, Time Trial, and Battle modes.

All the classic *Mario Kart* items are present including bananas, shells, and mushrooms; essential to gain the upper hand when you're near the back of the field. Holding the R button while turning allows for some drifting to shave seconds off your time, and each coin strewn along the track provides a slight increase to your top speed, with the total that can be collected being 55, a sum far higher than *MK8*'s limit of ten (interestingly, item boxes are represented as whole sprites, whereas coins are flat against the road surface). Each character is rated for speed and weight, giving a slight variation in handling, but of course, choosing your driver is influenced by personal preference; we all have our favourites when it comes to the Mushroom Kingdom.

In the context of a world that has become enthralled with *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* on the Nintendo Switch, it's apparent when playing *Super Circuit* today how carefully the tracks were crafted, without the benefit of the courses having the twisting verticality of the most recent entry in the series. The tracks might lack the contortionist thrills of *Mario Kart 8*, but thanks to the masterful placing of corners, jumps, and shortcuts, *Super Circuit*'s routes are just as exciting while confined to their flat plane of existence. There's a perfect racing line to find, whether it be on the rickety bridges of Boo Lake, the mouse-infested yellowness of Cheese Land, or the arid curves of Yoshi Desert. Rainbow Road makes an appearance too, of course, flaunting the Advance's broad colour palette. The reward of unlocking classic SNES tracks also adds longevity. The GBA isn't short of excellent racers, each demonstrating the technical grunt of the little console, but *Super Circuit* stands out with its pixel-sharp sprites and textures, smooth background parallax scrolling, and of course that addictive gameplay.

Were it not for the existence of *Pokémon*, *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* would be the best-selling Game Boy Advance game of all time. It's a significant release on the GBA and remains a thoroughly enjoyable racing game which I still find myself playing to this day. If you have three friends with GBAs, there's plenty of scope for retro multiplayer racing too, as well as the opportunity to trade Time Trial ghost data. *Super Circuit* remains a recommended drive — it's the connoisseur's choice of *Mario Kart* ride.



NINTENDO DS.

First Released:
2004

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Launch Price:
JP ¥15,000
US \$149.99
UK £99.99

DS Game Card

The DS game card contained up to 512MB of flash memory, as well as an EEPROM (electrically erasable programmable read-only memory) for save data. There are some cards in existence that only work with the DSi model, due to the game using that console's exclusive features — these were manufactured in white.

I still remember the day I found out I was getting my Nintendo DS. I was graduating high school soon and my dad called me asking, “If a parent were to be buying their kid the newest hot handheld gaming system, would it be a Sony PSP or a Nintendo DS?” He knew the name Nintendo and that was his first instinct, but it seemed somehow wrong to him. The PSP (an incredible system in its own right) resembled much more the kind of thing he expected: a single screen, the usual set of buttons, a D-pad, and something that resembled a control stick. Meanwhile the Nintendo DS was altogether different. Sure, some of the recognisable buttons were there, but it had a built-in microphone and a pair of screens. Even more oddly, one of the screens was touch sensitive and the device included a stylus, something that, to him, resembled some kind of pocket productivity gadget intended for office use rather than gaming. While today I have a great deal of love for both of these systems, at the time the answer couldn’t have been any more obvious to me: I had to have the Nintendo DS.

First released in North America in November of 2004, the Nintendo DS is the best selling handheld to date (though at its current rate, the Nintendo Switch may have surpassed it by the time you read this). Across four separate models the system has sold a total of 154.4 million units, more than any other handheld gaming device; and even when ranked amongst all gaming systems is second only to the PlayStation 2. There’s a myriad of reasons for what contributed to its success: name recognition, price point and game library being just some of them. But the one truly key factor was the simplicity of its gimmick. Dual screens were interesting, but the touchscreen specifically is what really made the DS stand out. We take for granted now how common touchscreens are on our phones, but the first successful one, the iPhone, wouldn’t release for another 3

years after the original DS. Touchscreens weren’t exactly unheard of, but being able to regularly use one as part of a gaming experience was a completely new and innovative experience, one that immediately set the DS apart as something different from anything people had played before. This is exactly what Nintendo had hoped for.

The name DS actually has two different meanings. The on-the-nose obvious interpretation most take it for is ‘dual screen’, an easy-to-remember name that draws attention to the system’s biggest visual difference from its predecessors. To Nintendo internally though, this name also meant ‘Developer’s System’, the idea being that the DS opened up new ways for games to be played, and thus gave developers the ability to make games they may have dreamed up in the past that couldn’t have been realised before. And the benefits of this concept extended not only to giving developers more freedom, but also potentially towards opening gaming to whole new audiences.

Much like the Wii’s motion controls and the Switch’s namesake feature of being both portable and dockable, the DS’s touchscreen was a new feature that not only changed the way games could be played, but, even more importantly, was a concept that was immediately understood by anyone who saw it being used. Controls for a gaming system can be alien to someone who hasn’t played on one before, but a touchscreen? Tap and drag objects, draw things like you would with a pencil, write out a message to send over to someone else — all of these were concepts people could quickly latch on to without nearly as much instruction as a more traditional game might require. And so while the Nintendo DS of course had its first party game library and exclusive titles which helped bring long term fans back for more, the system’s popularity was able to soar to a whole new level thanks to the inclusion of new games that its unique design made possible.

NINTENDO DS SYSTEM VARIATIONS

Not only were there multiple iterations of the DS console line, but there were also an incredible array of different colours and designs released too. Over the next few pages you'll see some of the most interesting and wacky ones!

099
NDS Titanium
[Launch Version]
2004



099



102

100
NDS Pepsi Twist
[Special Promotion]
2005



100



101

101
NDS Mew Purple
[Pokémon Center Exclusive]
2006



104

103
NDS Doraemon
[Sega Prize Drawing]
2006



103

Puzzle games like *Brain Training*, drawing games like *Art Academy*, rhythm games that incorporated screen tapping, and of course, one of the most unique franchises to really flourish on the system: *Nintendogs*. These games brought in whole new audiences of people that may have never owned another gaming system before, or, in some cases, even since.

So that, in large part, is why the system sold well, but it'd be a disservice for me to not talk about the rest of the system's incredible library of games, some of which leveraged the system's unique design, and some that didn't. A variety of *Mario* titles including new additions to the *Mario & Luigi* sub series, numerous *The Legend of Zelda* games including one of the series's few direct sequels with *Phantom Hourglass* (sequel to *The Wind Waker* on GameCube), and of course a large number of *Pokémon* titles including two of my absolute favourite mainline entries: *HeartGold/SoulSilver* and *Black/White 2*. All classics, but the library goes so much further than that.

Personally, I'm a huge RPG fan, and it was during this era that we saw a lot of the more classical style JRPGs make their way from consoles to finding a new home on handhelds. Square Enix ported and remade numerous games for the system including classics like *Final Fantasy IV* and *Chrono Trigger*, but even more important were the number of games they ported over that, in the US at least, had never been officially released before. *Final Fantasy III* made its US debut with added plot elements and a 3D facelift, and while we got one new *Dragon Quest* game native to the system with *DQIX*, we also, for the very first time in the US, got to play *Dragon Quest IV, V*, and *VI*. Atlus also had a number of new classics for the system including the *Etrian Odyssey* series and a trio of *Shin Megami Tensei* games including the more traditional *Strange Journey* and a pair of tactical RPG spinoffs with *Devil Survivor*.

When I think about the DS library though, there are two games that immediately come to mind that I can't help but gush about: *Radiant Historia* and *The World Ends with You*. The reasons for *Radiant Historia* are simple enough, it's just an incredible RPG worthy of your time with fantastic combat and a great cast of characters. But *The World Ends with You* is especially relevant because it represented something truly unique to the DS. The game's combat system revolves around using both of the DS's screens and its touch functionality. Put simply, you controlled one character on the bottom screen using touch controls, while controlling another character on the top screen using the D-pad. Enemies and attacks would happen simultaneously on both these screens, requiring you to constantly split your attention. Playing this felt like hectic madness, and the exact experience hasn't really been properly emulated since. The game had both a mobile and a Switch port that, for obvious reasons, had to change to account for only one screen. This more or less removed the spark that made it special, and the game's eventual sequel *NEO: The*

World Ends with You went for a different combat system entirely. To this day no other game has managed to give me the same feeling that *The World Ends with You* did on my first playthrough, and it is an experience that, for now, seems entirely locked to the Nintendo DS and its immediate follow up system: the 3DS.

The games mentioned so far are only some of the amazing DS games out there. I wish I could write at length about every single one that has left me with fond memories, but that alone would fill the pages of its own dedicated book. To highlight a few more though: *Castlevania*, *Ace Attorney*, *999*, *Professor Layton*, *Ghost Trick*, *Advance Wars*, *Mega Man ZX*, *WarioWare*... all fantastic games and franchises that have aged incredibly well and are still worth playing, with even more titles I'm sure I've neglected to mention that you yourself may hold a deep love for.

Like Nintendo's previous handheld systems, and the systems it has released since, the Nintendo DS evolved over time with multiple iterations adding new changes and features. The original model released in 2004 was, to put it simply, beefy. It still met the base criteria for being a handheld, but it certainly pushed the limit a bit more in terms of being something that could easily fit in your pocket. While at first glance it looked like something completely new compared to what Nintendo had released in recent history, the DS actually owes a lot of its design to Nintendo's past. The touchscreen was new of course, but the dual screens and clamshell approach had previously been used in a number of Nintendo's Game & Watch systems released in the '80s. Most notably, the *Donkey Kong Game & Watch* released in 1982 heavily resembles the DS thanks to not only having the same shape, but also being the first system to include the now iconic cross-shaped D-pad.

While the original DS was a smash hit, its large design left something to be desired, which quickly got addressed when the console's second iteration released just two years later in 2006: the DS Lite. Offering the same functionality as the original DS, including backwards compatibility with the Game Boy Advance library, the DS Lite fit everything into a much smaller, lighter body that also had a slightly larger and brighter screen. This was in fact the first DS I personally owned and referenced earlier, a Crimson DS Lite featuring a red and black body. Even after new versions were released, the GBA and DS represent two of my favourite libraries of games, and so keeping them both alive on a single system made it my constant companion through my college years, right up until it was unfortunately stolen.

Just two years after the Lite's release, November of 2008 brought a new design and what is possibly the biggest shift in iterative releases for a Nintendo system with the DSi. This new design removed the GBA slot, but in exchange added a number of new features including a pair of cameras, internal storage, and, most importantly, the Nintendo DSi Shop. The original DS and DS Lite only

played games purchased physically, while the DSi looked to further broaden the system’s audience and options by adding a whole new library of smaller games that could be purchased digitally, oftentimes offering different, more focused experiences than you would normally find in a full-priced brand-new game. While the DSi and DS may have played much of the same main library, the DSi’s new software features and digital store helped make it feel like a distinct new system. A year later in 2007, Nintendo released the 4th and final version of the DS, the DSi XL, a system that was mostly identical to the DSi with the one important difference of having a larger body and larger screens, offering greater visibility and larger, more legible text.

The DS line eventually came to an end when its successor, the 3DS, was released in 2011. While this handheld eventually found its own rhythm (and has its own incredible list of games), it failed to reach the same heights that its predecessor had, in large part because it never really truly replaced what made the DS special. The original DS is a great example of the perfect system released at the perfect time. The introduction of the touchscreen and its portable nature made it the perfect gaming companion not just for traditionalists, but for a large new audience that had yet to be tapped into. As the years passed and smartphones became more prevalent, much of what made the DS unique was made less relevant as everyone began to carry touchscreen interfaces right in their pocket, and mobile gaming began to grow. This isn’t to say the 3DS was a worse system than its predecessor, it just had the unfortunate timing of missing the train on what helped the original explode in popularity.

To this day, the combined libraries of both systems offer one of the most robust, well-rounded lists of games; from simple brain teasers, to well executed classic formulas, to completely unique experiences that can’t quite be captured again on another console or handheld. A fact that, in all honesty, has quickly made it one of the most precious systems to me. In a time of ports, remasters, remakes, and official emulators aplenty, the DS and 3DS stand as systems that may very well forever be the best place to play their library of games, as they remain the only way to play many of them the way they were intended.

Touching Is Good

An American trailer was created for Metroid Prime Hunters. Titled 'Dig', the spot was directed by Underworld and Live Free Die Hard director Len Wiseman. It features a grave digger in a futuristic setting, laying bounty hunters to rest. As it comes to an end, the racy DS tag line 'touching is good' appears on screen.



105
NDS Hot Summer Mario
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2005

108
NDS Hot Summer Donkey
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2005

111
NDS Lite Pikachu Yellow
[Pokémon Center Exclusive]
2007



105



108



111

106
NDS Hot Summer Peach
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2005

109
NDS Hot Summer Yoshi
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2005

112
NDS Lite Diamond & Pearl Edition
2006



106



109



112

107
NDS Hot Summer Koopa
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2005

110
NDS Hot Summer Wario
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2005

113
NDS Lite Wonderful World Edition
2007



107



110



113



114



115



116



117



119



118

114
Winning Eleven Edition
2006

116
RX-93 v Gundam Edition
2007

118
BAPE Milo Edition [Gold]
2008

115
Love and Berry Edition
2006

117
BAPE Milo Edition [Multicolor]
2008

119
Lime Green
2009



120



121



122



123



124



125



126



127



128

120
NDS Lite Pikachu DAISUKI Club
[Pokémon DAISUKI Club]
2006

123
NDSi Pokémon Black Edition
2011

126
NDSi LovePlus+ Pink Edition
2009

121
NDSi Super Mario Bros.
25th Anniversary
2010

124
NDSi Crystal Chronicles
2009

127
NDSi LovePlus+ Blue Edition
2009

122
NDSi Gyakuten Kenji Edition
2009

125
NDSi Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days
2009

128
NDSi LovePlus+ Green Edition
2009



LET'S-A-GO AGAIN.

On Christmas Eve in 2004, I played my Indigo Game Boy Advance for the last time.

The next morning, I found a system that was twice as special under the tree — a brand new silver Nintendo DS. Most of that morning is a blur of excitement, memories lost in the rush of getting the exact gift you wanted. I do remember that Santa also snuck *Super Mario 64 DS* and *Spider-Man 2* in there with the device, knowing that I would need games to occupy my grubby 8-year-old fingers. Curled up by the fireplace, I tapped my screen and embarked on an altogether new kind of gaming session, as many other children around the world surely did that same day.

There's something truly special about looking back on getting new game consoles as a child; maybe it's the weight of responsibility we accumulate on our way to adulthood, the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia, or any other number of factors. However, the launch of the DS was special for even greater reasons: for many of us, it was the most *different* console, the most innovative thing we had ever put our hands on.

The Nintendo DS arrived in late 2004, a few years before the first iPhone would send touchscreen devices through the stratosphere and into the hands of seemingly every person on the planet. Its addition of a second, touchable screen was nothing short of mind-blowing at the time, but looking back at Nintendo's trajectory with the benefit of hindsight, it makes sense. The Game Boy line had been iterated upon over the years, but this was the first big leap that the company made in the handheld space — and while we didn't know it at the time, it was the genesis for an era defined by innovation, resulting in consoles like the Wii, Wii U, 3DS and, eventually, Switch.

The DS launch saw Nintendo trying to find new ways for players to experience games while maintaining its commitment to handheld gaming, a market that its competitors were not pursuing as successfully at the time. Sony's PSP would not arrive for another six months, allowing Nintendo to corner the handheld market, experiment and blaze a trail for on-the-go gaming. Over the course of the next seven years or so, and across multiple iterations of the system — including the popular DSi — it would successfully change the way we played handheld games.

At launch, though, Nintendo didn't seem to be breaking any new ground in the games department, at least on the surface. Instead of launching with a brand new IP or fresh instalments in their many beloved franchises, Nintendo chose to revisit a game that was already considered a classic: *Super Mario 64*, a game that accompanied the launch of its Nintendo 64 home system. They called it *Super Mario 64 DS*, about as straightforward as that name could get. The game, however, was anything but.

Super Mario 64 DS could have simply been a port of one of Nintendo's biggest games — but upon flipping open the DS and tapping on the game's title, we were greeted almost immediately by the familiar "It's a-me, Mario" voiceline along with the unfamiliar 'Touch to Start' prompt. It may not seem outwardly game-changing, but those three words established that Nintendo had gone all in on this new technology from the get-go — and it only gets more divergent from there.

Four Times The Fun

The DS version of *Super Mario 64* initially had the title *Super Mario 64 x 4*, and featured co-op multiplayer and the ability to change between Mario, Luigi, Yoshi and Wario at will via the touch screen in single player. These functions were removed during development, but were present during an E3 2004 demo.

The Mystery Of Luigi

Following the 2020 Nintendo 'gigaleak', development files for the original N64 version of Super Mario 64 were released, and people quickly discovered a model for Luigi within said files. Shigeru Miyamoto himself had stated the character was intended to appear, with the leak confirming this, but it wasn't until the DS version that the green plumber became playable in the game.

The game's opening cutscene is brand new, introducing Mario along with Luigi, Wario, and Yoshi. Tying together the original game's iconic opening letter with a showcase for the game's new (and cutting-edge at the time) graphics, past and present blended to create an exciting subversion. Sure, it was odd to see these new faces at the outset of the game, but who doesn't love Mario's cast of characters? All the little subversions, however, come to a head when the first level begins and you're not only locked out of the castle — you aren't even playing as Mario.

From the tutorial and for the next hour or so, players experience the iconic first few levels of Super Mario 64 as Yoshi, bringing a completely new dynamic to the game. Yoshi jumps differently than Mario, has different mechanics to Mario, and is even greeted in the castle by Toad differently than Mario. Controlling Yoshi with either the D-pad or stylus on the touch screen, I dove through paintings and into levels with an entirely new set of eyes. Imagine my further surprise when I found a Mario hat early on that allowed me to transform Yoshi into the moustachioed plumber until he got hit — to be honest, new mechanics like this blew my mind.

Once you unlock Mario after collecting eight stars and completing a new level, the game begins to take a more familiar shape, but there are still plenty of surprises to be found. For starters, you could still unlock Luigi and Wario, who each boast their own abilities and mechanics that can help you collect new stars. These new stars, adding up to 150 in total, are only part of all the new content introduced in Super Mario 64 DS, making it feel like an early predecessor to the culture of remakes that has dominated gaming throughout the 2010s and beyond.

Super Mario 64 DS also boasted entirely new modes alongside the single-player story: the Rec Room and Versus Mode. The Rec Room was a series of minigames that made excellent use of the touchscreen and allowed players to unlock more games by finding keys in the single-player mode. These weren't tacked-on minigames either, many were their own fully-realised, bite-sized experiences, ones which wouldn't feel out of place in a Mario Party title. Whether you were plucking petals off a flower with the stylus or tapping your way through visual puzzles, the Rec Room found multiple ways to have play-

ers actually engage with the screen. Luigi's blackjack minigame was always a standout for me — something about seeing the lankier Mario brother dealing cards at a casino has always tickled me.

Versus Mode, on the other hand, was a first for the series on handheld. In this wireless battle mode, you and up to four friends could duke it out for stars and coins on a collection of maps, collecting power-ups and using special moves to get the upper hand. Nintendo also cleverly designed the mode so that only one player had to have the game cartridge for others to join, meaning my friends and I could play at school even if only I owned the game. The fact that both these full-featured game modes came bundled in with the already expansive main game was, and still is, somewhat staggering — there's a case to be made that this is one of the most feature-rich Mario titles ever produced.

More than all the new additions, when I think about Super Mario 64 DS, I remember how different the game just felt to play. The dual screens of the DS introduced entirely new possibilities for the game, like having the action happen on the top screen while the bottom one showed a map of the level, as well as camera controls. Early on Lakitu even says "why don't you look for him on the Touch Screen, Yoshi?" While some may have viewed this addition as hand-holding, I wager that it actually enhances the experience by quite a bit; the ever-present map fundamentally changes how the game is played, and makes searching for harder to find objects much less frustrating.

The bottom screen having touch capabilities also brought players into the action more than ever. Dragging the stylus could move the player across the map, but it also worked itself into gameplay — most notably when spinning Bowser around before flinging him into a bomb. It may seem like a small change on the surface, but spinning a stylus or even your own finger on the screen rather than twirling an analog stick felt shockingly immersive at the time.

Even the next flagship Mario title on the system, 2006's New Super Mario Bros., didn't feel as innovative or fresh as Super Mario 64 DS did. This game seemed laser-focused on providing players with an entirely new experience, and it delivered.



Double D

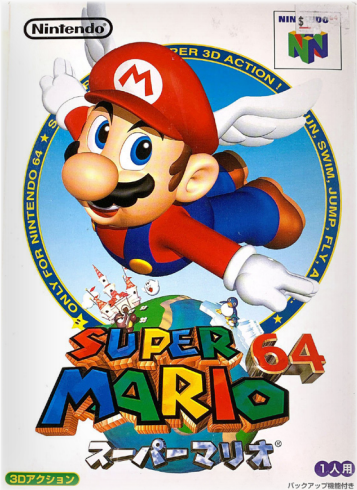
The 64DD was an expansion to the N64 console, which accepting 64MB magnetic disks. It was an innovative format with plenty of positives, however it was only released in Japan, and was discontinued within 14 months, with only 10 commercial disks ever released for it.

Even More 64

First shown at Nintendo's Shoshinkai 1996 game show, very little was known about the cancelled Super Mario 64 DD until a version was found and dumped online in 2014. Some had speculated this was to be the mythical Super Mario 64 2, however it became clear that this was actually just an enhanced port of the original game, that would have featured a playable Luigi.



let's-a-go again.



129



130



Looking back on it, *Super Mario 64 DS* is something of a miracle. It remains one of the least cynical remakes ever released, packed with new levels, challenges, characters, game modes, and features. In retrospect, it was the perfect title to begin a new era for Nintendo, and stands as the definitive edition of the game for me. It's not uncommon for companies to leave the past behind when releasing new technology or hardware, but with *Super Mario 64 DS*, Nintendo brought the past with it into a new era.

In a sense, the choice to have that game be a launch title for the Nintendo DS is indicative of the generational leap that the company was looking to make with its new handheld. The system had the ability to play Game Boy Advance

titles via a second cartridge port on its underside, meaning that the company's past would never truly be left behind — even as games for the system became increasingly involved with its new technology.

Even with new home consoles coming out over the years, the DS remained close to my heart, going on to contain one of my favourite gaming catalogues of all time. From new entries in beloved franchises like *Pokémon Diamond* and *Pearl* or *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days*, to entirely new experiences like *Scribblenauts* or *The World Ends with You*, the console had something for everyone. It introduced me to genres and series I had never tried before and would come to love, and my experiences were often completely different than those had by my friends and family who had a DS of their own. While this phenomenon happens with almost any system, we grew with this console in different ways — as a player, it makes you feel special.

No matter where the DS took me, though, I always took the time to pop *Super Mario 64 DS* back in to start a fresh game or spend a few minutes in the Rec Room. Launch titles have a tendency to stick in the minds of players or be forgotten completely, written off as tech demos or worse, but *Super Mario 64 DS* has stood the test of time. The game's inherent fun factor and its level of synergy with the handheld it lived on has given it staying power, the rare case where a re-release can surpass the original simply by virtue of being on new hardware.

The DS is undoubtedly a beloved system, but I've always felt it never quite got its due for the impact it had on the gaming landscape. It proved the viability of touch controls in gaming, for better or worse. It proved once again that handheld systems were capable of producing genuine masterworks, and launched with one to prove that point. It launched an entire ecosystem that would more or less come to define Nintendo's family of consoles, with the handheld and touchscreen capabilities of the DS and its successor — the 3DS — merging with the motion control technology of the Wii to produce the Switch. Above all else, however, it proved that Nintendo had their finger on the pulse of what gaming is all about, at least at the time: placing players into new worlds to have new experiences in new ways.

To me, that's why the little silver handheld is a massive part of what makes gaming so special. From that Christmas morning until the day it broke, my DS rarely left my side, whether it was in my hands, tucked under my pillow late at night to hide it from my parents, or in my backpack at school. The next adventure was always close at hand — and with the technological jump that the DS made, it was more real than ever.

let's-a-go again.



131



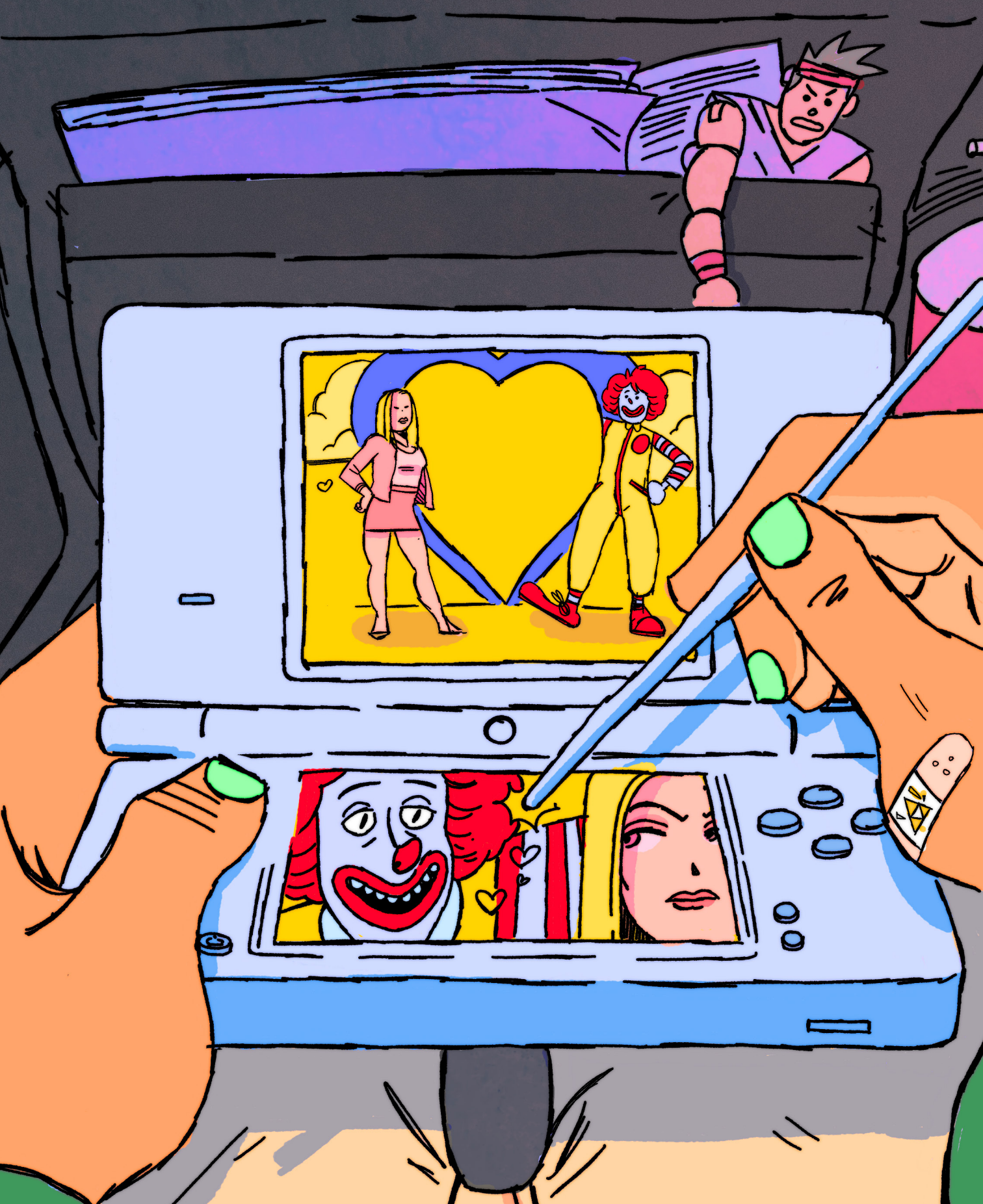
132

129
Super Mario 64
[Nintendo 64]
1996

131
Super Mario 64
[Nintendo 64]
1996

130
Super Mario 3D All-Stars
[Nintendo Switch]
2020

132
Super Mario 64 DS
[Nintendo DS]
2004



TOUCH ME.

When the Nintendo DS launched in 2004, we had no idea what had hit us. In addition to revolutionising the handheld console market by packing in two displays, one of which was a touchscreen, it threw open a doorway the Game Boy had been knocking on for years. Licensed and unlicensed peripherals for the Game Boy include a sonar for fishing, a camera, and even a motorcycle servicing reader. But the DS was the console that truly fostered unbridled creativity.

TESTING THE WATERS

Project Rub might be the first title to show just how far the DS could go. While its story hasn't aged all that well, the minigames within are the first example of a developer truly letting its creativity go wild. Players are tasked with doing all sorts, from guiding goldfish out of someone's stomach and weaving through a stampede of bulls, to screaming "I love you" into the microphone as loud as possible.

WarioWare: Touched! also doubled down on the minigame madness, bringing an insane collection of microgames to the series. Like *Project Rub*, it made use of everything the DS had to offer — the touchscreen, microphone, every button — and it was addictive. However, the DS also had some fairly normal launch titles that still pushed the boat out.

Super Mario 64 DS is an almost like-for-like remake of *Super Mario 64* from the N64, but with a key difference. Players could switch between controlling Mario, Yoshi, Wario, or Luigi, each of whom had their own strengths that could play into the worlds fans were familiar with from the original title. This was where the familiar met the new, with a twist that wasn't so far out there that it pushed anyone away. Similarly, the DS version of *The Urbz: Sims in the City* is a marvellous example of pushing boundaries within a familiar setting. The game has a great story, decent RPG elements, and even an endgame that raises the overall runtime for completionists, yet it's still *The Sims* at its core.

This was only the beginning though.

LEANING IN

Creativity took root in the DS with those early games, laying the foundations for the shoots and leaves that would soon be battling for the limelight. For example, *Professor Layton and the Curious Village* is, in simple terms, a classic point-and-click adventure game. However, thanks to a collection of fiendishly brow-furrowing puzzles that players used the touchscreen to solve, it ascended to something greater. The game reinvented the wheel in basically every way. Its map and environment could even be tapped for coins using the stylus, providing an in-game advantage if utilised well enough.

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass did the same with one of Nintendo's flagship franchises. It literally pushed the boat out, returning players to a sea-faring *Zelda* outing with the classic combination of puzzles, dungeons, bosses, and an inviting world that becomes more engrossing the longer the story goes on.

Do You Feel The Magic?

Known in North America as *Feel the Magic: XY/XX*, *Project Rub* was developed by the Sega studio Sonic Team. Although it sports a risqué title and suggestive mini-games, the team were keen to steer away from overly sexualised content, relying on their predominantly female development team to lead the way.



Controlling Link using the touchscreen never gets old, even today, and its success showed Nintendo that fans weren't only okay with strange new mechanics, they welcomed them. In the same vein, *Pokémon Diamond* and *Pearl*, the first mainline entries on the DS, were a roaring victory for the console. Touchscreen controls blended well with the familiar universe, and the added power of the device presented the best handheld *Pokémon* at the time.

It wasn't just Nintendo taking chances though, Capcom got on board with *Resident Evil: Deadly Silence*. While the name is just one example of how far developers were willing to go to include DS in their game names, the classic survival horror game actually translated rather well. It was also the first decent example of a true survival horror classic on a handheld console, paving the way for all future handheld horror games, not just on the DS, but the Switch as well.

Drawn To Life is an excellent example of a game that took the touchscreen and made a game around it. Players had to solve puzzles by drawing things, opening up massive potential for divergent gameplay. The game got a decent reception, but it was way ahead of its time. Even *Ōkamiden*, a game that relied on players drawing specific shapes for all aspects of gameplay, never hit home with mainstream audiences.

The ideas kept coming thick and fast from developers. They realised that DS owners were pretty much up for anything, and that only caused more creativity to be poured into each game cartridge. *Pac-Pix* is a *Pac-Man* game with a DS difference. You have to draw Pac-Man to

make him appear and control him. The concept sounds like a mish-mash of ideas that wouldn't work, a series of missions in which you draw Pac-Man and have him fight his ghostly foes, but it works really well because it gives DS owners what they want from any game on the system — validation that they're using every aspect of this expensive handheld they purchased and loving every second of it. This is the core of why creativity from developers made the DS a success. It wasn't a console filled with titles you could play on everything else, each title had unique features and felt fresh as a result.

This went even further though, and momentum never really stopped. Once it became clear that the DS was hotter than the Game Boy, and everyone and their mum was using it, every developer wanted in on the market. The strangest games began to release, titles that have no business being on a game console, such as cooking applications or guitar simulators. You could tap through a series of recipes like a cookbook, though you most definitely don't want to spill your ragu on your DS. You could strum out a new combination of chords while on the go and it didn't even matter that you had to contort your hand in unholy ways to make a decent sound.

With the inception of these games, titles that were exclusive to the DS because it was so popular that you'd be mad not to at least try, came the peripherals. As I alluded to at the start, the Game Boy became the home for many accessories, even ones that were cancelled, like the WorkBoy, and are only coming to light decades later. This time though, businesses knew that they needed to go in hard, and you can find evidence of this all over the second-hand market.

WHY NOT, WHY SHOULDN'T I TURN THE DS INTO AN INSTRUMENT?

While players were lapping up the unique games and mechanics on the DS, the console was attracting more and more attention. Much like the Game Boy before it, so many people owned a DS that it became worth investing in not just software, but hardware for it too. This is where the spark of creativity that took root in the DS bloomed into a glorious, sprawling tree, the leaves of which are still being uncovered.

The best example of this is the crowning jewel for DS collectors, the McDonald's Nintendo DS console, and accompanying staff training software. The console was only produced as a limited run in Japan, where it was used to train staff at the fast food chain in everything from making burgers and serving customers, to learning how to manage staff and catching up on the employee handbook. Why did this happen? Because everyone loved the DS, and it was easier to have an application developed for the console on a card that could be easily distributed rather than what companies would do today — make a smartphone app for it.

Players were benefitting from this spirit of innovation, which resulted in hardware peripherals that we hadn't seen before or since. Even Nintendo Labo doesn't come close to what the DS had. At the peak of the *Guitar Hero* series, the DS version launched with a controller that strapped around the console and replicated the rhythmic button mashing action of the guitar-shaped peripherals on other home consoles. It proved that you don't need the most power on the market, or a giant plastic guitar, to provide a great gameplay experience.

It's not an understatement to say that the DS had almost everything thrown at it. While not all of it stuck, there are some great remnants of this brief period in time when you could get all sorts of nonsense for what, in hindsight, was a fairly limited handheld. For example, the stylus just wasn't enough for some games, so developers produced their own accessories, including a calligraphy brush and even a paddle controller, like the one you used for the original *Pong*. This was the games industry coming full circle.

I mentioned the WorkBoy for Game Boy earlier, an accessory and game that transformed the device into a PDA with the intention of making it a vital part of your work day. *Learn With Pokémon Typing Adventure* didn't quite have the same goals, but it did add a keyboard to the DS. Most consoles had expensive keyboard adaptors designed purely for MMOs, but this was just another plug-in that could enhance your DS experience, even if you only used it with PictoChat.

Speaking of *PictoChat*, this allowed users to log into a local chatroom, created by your DS, and chat with others via the app — even letting you send hand-drawn images. Eventually, the potential in this was realised, and an Opera-based web browser was developed. Sure, it was extremely limited by today's standards, but it let you access the internet on a handheld device to find information on the go. At the time, no one could ever have thought this was necessary, yet now we can't play a game without looking up a guide for a puzzle on our phones.

Golden Arches

The McDonald's branded Nintendo DSi was used to help staff training and management in Japan, with dedicated game cards produced with snappy titles like *eSmart 2.0* and *eCDP*. This console is rare and highly collectable, and it's not hard to see why!



LIMITLESS POTENTIAL

The DS was the brave new world for the games industry. It became home to the craziest concepts, not only in terms of games. The sky really was the limit, and just when you thought you'd seen everything it had to offer, you were proven wrong.

No game demonstrates this more than *Metroid Prime Hunters*. The *Metroid Prime* series had enthralled players on the GameCube, and this handheld entry went above and beyond. Not only does it contain a 3D first-person *Metroid* experience, but it also iterated on the series' staples by adding new bounty hunters, an excellent multiplayer experience, and multiple planets to explore. How the developers crammed all that onto a DS cartridge without selling their souls or using dark magic is a mystery.

The DS was so popular that even unexpectedly mature titles could do well on it. *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* was a prime example. This game was as gruesome as *GTA2*, sharing its top-down camera, but also included a drug-dealing mechanic. This game is a far cry from what you'd expect on a Nintendo console, but that was the beauty of it. The game would eventually be ported to Sony's PSP handheld, but some felt this version was lacking due to there only being one screen. The DS is unexpected in every way, and if you let it, it'll surprise you with games and ideas you didn't know you wanted.

The console didn't just become home to unique games and IPs though, it also hosted its fair share of movie tie-ins and quick cash-grab games. However, these games, even the cancelled ones, demonstrate the creative freedom developers had. Every DS version of a game that was released across multiple consoles, such as *The Sims 2*, was unique on Nintendo's handheld system. This is because of the touchscreen and the fact that players were interested in something new, something that would challenge them in ways other consoles couldn't, or wouldn't, dare to.

One of the greatest side-effects of how popular the DS was, combined with its limited capabilities, is how demos and promotions were shared. Retailers and other businesses had to use cartridges to show fans demos for upcoming games, or load up promotional Pokémon to then share them via local WiFi. As a result, you can still find these on third-party resale sites today, but they go for a pretty penny. One of the most elusive is a trailer cartridge for *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, a game that didn't even launch on the DS.

WILL NINTENDO SWITCH IT UP?

Needless to say, the DS was magnesium held too close to a flame for the games industry. A small, fragile-looking device that burned brighter than anything we've seen before or since, petering out far too soon. As Nintendo continues to cull its servers, the digital-only games for the last remnants of the DS, and the 3DS family, will soon fall into obscurity.

The thing is, Nintendo has a chance to literally Switch things up. Nintendo Labo may not have been what the company wanted it to be, but the *Lego Mario* crossovers and titles like *Ring Fit Adventure* have proven there's a huge market out there who are still interested in new Nintendo properties with unique accessories. The question is, will Nintendo answer the call? As sales rise year on year, the answer should be yes, but today's Nintendo is far more cautious. Despite the Switch being a new home for the most creative indie games you can play, benefitting from the creativity the DS nurtured, it'll likely never burn as brightly as the most amazing console the handheld market has ever seen.

Wii U Wasn't All Bad...

Aside from the 3DS, the only other way to officially play DS games was via the Wii U Virtual Console, which boasted a number of DS ports. The unique GamePad for the console meant gamers could duplicate the feel of DS games, either by turning the Wii U pad on its side to allow both screens to be shown, or by using the pad as the bottom screen and the TV as the top screen. The Wii U Game Pad even had its own built-in stylus, just like the DS!

Seeing Double

The DS held a lot of innovation in its handheld form, not least of which were its dual screens. Sure, touchscreens are cool, but having two screens opened up a multitude of possibilities. Games like *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* (known as *Wish Room* in Japan), and its lesser-known sequel *Last Window: The Secret of Cape West*, had you hold the DS like a book to play, with text and pencil-sketched characters giving them the feel of a noir novel.



Nothing Fishy Here

Yes, this really existed. The Game Boy Pocket Sonar, sold only in Japan, allowed gamers who were also keen fishers to use their Game Boy as a sonar device to locate fish underwater. There was even a built-in minigame (though nothing as in-depth as the Game Boy Camera).





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NINTENDOGS.

It's not often that a simple, handheld video game feels alive to players, but with *Nintendogs* I think I speak for everyone when I say we absolutely felt a responsibility to care for and protect those digital dogs as if our own lives depended on it. True to its cute and casual roots, Nintendo took the digital pet concept popularised in the '90s by Tamagotchi and Nintendo's very own Pocket Pikachu, and brought it to life in the most adorable and interactive way imaginable. Players could choose from 15 different dog breeds — all featuring different colours, appearances and personalities. Not only did your dogs require the feeding, cleaning, and attention implicit in most mainstream digital pets — you could also talk to them using the microphone, train them to do tricks, pet and give them baths via the touchscreen and stylus, take them for walks, give them toys to play with, compete with them in obedience and agility trials... the amusement was endless!

'Bark Mode' was another great example of Nintendo's innovative use of wireless interactivity and communication on the DS. When activated, it allowed nearby players to exchange information, interact with each other's dogs, listen to in-game recordings, and even receive presents. Some might consider it a precursor to the beloved StreetPass and SpotPass systems on the 3DS; it certainly felt like a groundbreaking feature for its time.

I'm certain I'm not alone when I say that I was so emotionally connected to my *Nintendogs* game, the thought of allowing those computerised canines to go hungry or uncared for was heartbreaking. It was as if I were abandoning my own family pet (who, sadly, often did not receive as much attention as these digital imitations). I would even go so far as to pay my younger brother real money to take care of my dogs for me while I was busy or away for any length of time.

Of course, the longer you played *Nintendogs* — making money to collect more dogs, working your way up in the agility and obedience competitions, building an even stronger bond with a literal bunch of pixels — the more responsibility you had in-game (and the more stress you experienced when you weren't tending to it). Eventually, it overcame me when I finally slipped up on my care for more than a couple of days. The idea of turning that game back on and seeing their sad faces was something I could not bear. I would simply never turn the game back on again.

Regardless, it continues to live on in my memory, and in the memories of many other Nintendo DS owners. Like with much of Nintendo's catalogue, the casual, approachable nature of *Nintendogs* brought individuals to the Nintendo DS who may otherwise never have picked up a video game, firmly cementing its place in the cultural zeitgeist of the early 2000s.

ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD.

There are few things I remember wanting more in my childhood than the opportunity to play *Animal Crossing* — an unusual new game I'd heard rumours about in elementary school, but for many years could only dream of experiencing. Since the early '90s, when my uncle first introduced me to the SNES, I would eagerly consume any and all Nintendo content I could get my hands on. With no money or internet access at the time, this was not an easy feat. Ever a fan of miniature toy sets, I was fascinated by the tiny, intricate worlds Nintendo would build within their games. While playing them, I would imagine myself transported into these microcosms, digitally escaping from reality.

Then one day, a friend at school told me about a new game her older brother had recently brought home. She described hundreds of unique, almost sentient animal NPCs with whom you could live and interact, in a real-time world completely designed and controlled by you (well, you and a cunning raccoon).

At such a young age, this concept positively bewitched me. How did the game always know the time of day? Did the weather change with the real world, too? Was it actually possible to write letters to computerised animals, and have them write back to you?! I became convinced that this game was magical, and was hell-bent on experiencing it for myself.

Until the release of the Wii, my parents were adamant that the only gaming consoles allowed in our home were handhelds; the SNES stayed with my uncle and was only for special occasions. Unfortunately, this meant no *Animal Crossing* for me — until that fateful Christmas morning of 2005.

I had read in Nintendo Power that there would be a new version of *Animal Crossing* coming to the Nintendo DS — and frankly, this was all I could talk about, to anyone, for months on end. In a misguided attempt to sate my obsession, my parents broke down and got me both the system and the game for Christmas. Much to their dismay, this only fed the fire; I'm clearly still here talking about it, to anyone who will listen.

The fact that *Animal Crossing: Wild World* managed not only to hold on to the defining elements of the original game, but also improve and expand upon them with an entirely new adventure — all in a portable, handheld package — is absolutely astonishing. I could digitally escape to my own little town full of anthropomorphic friends, anytime I wanted. I could visit and play with my real friends via WiFi, even when physically restricted to my own home. I had complete control over every detail of my own life in this universe.

Animal Crossing: Wild World may only have been the ninth best-selling game on the Nintendo DS, but it was the first to capture my heart on the console, and I will never forget the memories I made with it.

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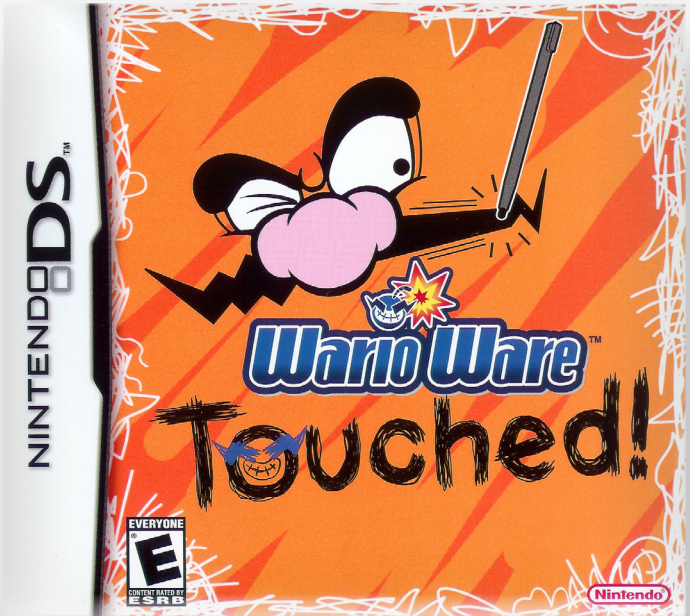
Nintendogs
2005

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Animal Crossing: Wild World
2005



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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS.

One of my very first memories involves playing *Zelda* as a toddler with my uncle, who is more like a big brother to me, and also the catalyst for my Nintendo obsession to this day. I can still clearly see the moment in my mind: we had *A Link to the Past* running on his SNES, and I was intently watching him play, constantly asking him to explain what everything was and how it all worked. Excitedly, I pointed to some ‘chickens’ I saw on the screen. He smiled, handed me the controller, and told me to “press this button to walk up to them, then hit them with your sword — they’re called ‘cuccos’”. My uncle also ensured I knew the proper terminology from the start.

At that age, I barely had the coordination to make Link move on the screen, much less get in a cucco fight — but in that moment, I felt for the first time a burning desire to master this game in front of me, no matter how long it took. It was a feeling I would come to know well, with many games throughout my life, and I absolutely loved it.

Since then, *The Legend of Zelda* series has remained extremely close to my heart. I do not exaggerate when I say many of the games have brought a tear to my eye upon booting them up, and later beating them — reminding me of how enchanted I was when I first experienced them as a child.

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass was a prime example of this. It combined a series I had always loved with a futuristic new “dual screen” handheld console that I was entirely obsessed with, broadening my gaming horizons. A direct sequel to the beloved *Wind Waker*, it was the core entry in the series for the Nintendo DS, bringing an updated version of a fantastic GameCube experience to handheld. For these reasons, it deserves recognition.

While its contemporaries on the console are sparse — namely, *Spirit Tracks* and various Tingle-based ‘games’ — in true Nintendo fashion, it bravely explored brand-new elements and features to the series. By incorporating touchscreen controls, real-time item selection, and beautiful 3D graphics, *Phantom Hourglass* ultimately built a stronger foundation for future *Zelda* games to shine.

There were definitely attributes of the game that had audiences split in their opinions — specifically, the lack of more traditional *Zelda* features like multiple dungeons and the classic button-based gameplay favoured by longtime fans. But again, what is Nintendo if not a company that has found success through innovation and pushing boundaries, for better or for worse? Without risk, there is no reward. It is a quality I will never cease to respect and admire, and it is personified in games like *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass*.

WARIOWARE: TOUCHED!.

WarioWare: Touched! was definitely not built to be a multiplayer game, but it was absolutely the one I played the most with my friends on the Nintendo DS. Each day in school you’d find us huddled around a single console in the school lunchroom, watching each other try to beat the zany microgames — the likes of which we’d never seen before. We’d chuckle quietly at the crude humour and nonsense narratives written into the game, thinking we were getting away with playing something our parents surely wouldn’t approve of.

Not only was *WarioWare: Touched!* a goofy, unique addition to the Nintendo DS library, it also utilised all of the features that made the system groundbreaking in the first place.

As with previous *WarioWare* entries, the game requires players to complete microgames with barebones instructions like “Find!”, “Shoot!”, or “Rotate!” — but this time it introduced touchscreen and microphone controls (one of each was required to play all of the 180 microgames).

The descriptions given for each game were amusing in themselves: “Poke a kitty... before we’re all DOOMED!”, “Life getting a little hairy? Grab hold of the problem and pull!!”, “Draw a sweet ‘stache or a beefy beard on the dude’s face!”, “Blow into the microphone to whisper sweet nothings! You love the Wario!”. Just imagining how the development team came up with them is entertainment in itself. It’s as if they were in competition with each other to see who could make the most ridiculous contributions possible.

To this day, I’m never entirely sure what’s going on in any of the games in the *WarioWare* series. But frankly, that’s what makes them so endearing. There’s something freeing about letting go and acknowledging that you absolutely do not understand what’s happening, nor do you need to. Part of the fun in the *WarioWare* games is simply being in the moment, accepting the chaos, and allowing it to enhance your fun. One moment you’re milking a cow — then, look! You’ve unlocked a ‘Grandma Simulator’: “blow on her hot tea” with the microphone and she’ll sagely tell you that “celery happens.” It makes zero sense, and that’s the whole point.

When innovative consoles are released, it’s not uncommon that the new features introduced become overlooked, if not actively utilised by the games on the system. Luckily for the Nintendo DS, *WarioWare: Touched!* showcased the console’s breadth of features in unusual and unforgettable ways, ensuring their survival on future systems. It did so in a way that felt entirely natural for a wacky *WarioWare* game, in turn helping to keep the series fresh for years to come.



NINTENDO 3DS.

First Released:
2011

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Launch Price:
JP ¥25,000
US \$249.99
UK £229.99

At ten years old, I didn't have the luxury to pay \$249.99 USD for an Aqua Blue Nintendo 3DS and a copy of *Pilotwings Resort*. I certainly didn't have another sum to get *Super Street Fighter IV 3D* alongside it. Unfortunately for Nintendo, my inability to purchase a launch 3DS was nothing compared to the general consumer's unwillingness to drop that chunk of change. We think of the 3DS now as a solid success. At release though, it was a catastrophic failure.

Mere months after the system hit store shelves, that price was slashed by nearly \$100 USD. The late Satoru Iwata shared the following in August of 2011, telling fans that “we are all too keenly aware that those of you who supported us by purchasing the 3DS in the beginning may feel betrayed and criticise this decision. This unprecedented timing for a price cut is because the situation has changed greatly since we originally launched the 3DS. We decided it was necessary to take this drastic step in order to ensure that large numbers of users will continue to enjoy the 3DS in the future.”

Writing for gamesindustry.biz, Christopher Dring reflected on these early moments. He wrote that “the initial launch looked good on paper, with 3.61 million consoles sold during its first month, one of the fastest selling consoles in history. However, Nintendo had actually expected to sell four million minimum during that first month, and during the next financial quarter sales ground to a halt.” It's not hard to see why — an uncompetitive price point and a dearth of compelling software lodged nail after nail into the handheld's premature coffin.

Iwata's statements illustrated what we already knew. Either something was going to change, or the 3DS was dead shortly after arrival. That early price cut and its mea culpa remain in my mind a decade later as a peculiar reflection of a tumultuous time in Nintendo's history.

The Wii had plateaued. The 3DS was failing. In retrospect, knowing what awaited the company in the following holiday — the ill-fated Wii U — the future was no brighter.

But, the 3DS received what its younger HD sibling never did — a second chance. Suddenly, Nintendo was aggressive, immediately correcting for its mistakes, placating what would become a fraction of the 3DS' final install base with a handful of digital Game Boy Advance titles and a written apology, all efforts looking beyond to the 150+ million DS owners who had yet to be captivated by that system's successor. The 3DS, ostensibly, launched twice.

The handheld had a hell of a run beginning in Summer 2011 that continued through the Fall and Holiday. *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D*. *Star Fox 64 3D*. *Super Mario 3D Land*. *Mario Kart 7*. The exclusive hits were rolling, building momentum with each release, elevating the excitement with each passing month. The 3DS, finally, had a chance — and a good one.

For me, every 2011 Nintendo Power cover with another 3DS tentpole was a tantalising reminder that the machine wasn't yet in my hands. It took until Christmas of that year — when I unwrapped my little blue portable — to finally step into its ecosystem. That was probably for the best. Not only did I receive three of the four aforementioned titles that same holiday, but I also had the benefit of a fleshed-out play environment (seeing as the 3DS eShop didn't even launch until June of 2011). Nintendo was undoubtedly playing catch-up with itself throughout that first calendar year.

Yet, the combination of a reasonable price point and compelling exclusives to replace the likes of *Steel Diver* set the machine up nicely going into 2012. I was enamoured with it that Winter break, hiding from visiting relatives in my room as I traversed the first original pocket-sized 3D *Mario* game. I was in awe of the

3DS Game Card

The 3DS game card is almost identical to that of the DS, except for a small tab sticking out from its right side to prevent it being inserted into any of the DS line of consoles. Their storage capacity was also much larger than the DS cards, ranging from 1GB all the way up to 8GB.

A Very Small Library

Only two games were released physically for the New Nintendo 3DS exclusively in the UK - Fire Emblem Warriors and Xenoblade Chronicles 3D. North America also got a release of Runbow Pocket Deluxe Edition. 44 other New Nintendo 3DS exclusive games released digitally, however.



hardware's ability to offer an experience commensurate with the Wii under my TV. I was even more impressed, as an adult, to see Wii U games ported to the plucky device.

The hardware was nothing if not capable, equipped with just the right amount of power and just the right number of Nintendo-certified gimmicks. The latter captivated me as a kid. Glasses-free 3D, as the box advertised, proved to be fairly true to life. I remember spending minutes merely gazing at the stereoscopic effect on my home screen as the icon for *Ocarina of Time 3D* spun lazily around, seemingly brushing my nose with each passing revolution. Aside from a few genuine implementations though, 3D was a party trick.

Beyond the occasional clever *3D Land* puzzle, the stereoscopic display was arguably the least integral hardware feature Nintendo has ever conceptualised. Look no further than the hardware revisions themselves for proof. As was standard since the days of the Game Boy, 3DS received myriad revamped models of varying levels of importance. The 3DS XL came first and borrowed its identity from the DSi XL before it. This one just had a bigger screen.

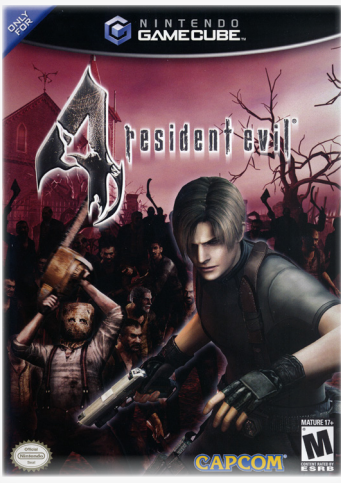
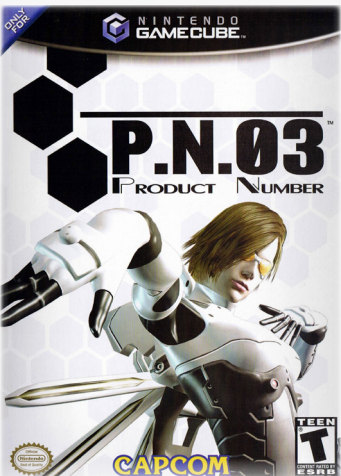
That model was directly improved by the New 3DS XL (and its smaller counterpart the New 3DS), which was the most substantive upgrade the system ever received. With a bit more horsepower, Circle Pad Pro utility built into the new C-Stick nub, a stabilised 3D effect, and other tweaks, it was a comparative powerhouse. The New 3DS is certainly the definitive iteration, and the one that I play to this day. Unfortunately though, its added juice was never fully taken advantage of, as the lion's share of 3DS owners played across models with differing internals. Besides the occasional exclusive title (such as *Xenoblade Chronicles 3D*), the New 3DS' features were mainly quality-of-life.

However, these comprise only half of the handheld's revisions. In a move akin to the Wii Mini, Nintendo opted to ship 3DS systems stripped to their bare essentials. The 2DS played all the same games, but removed the hinge and — curiously — the stereoscopic screen. The New 2DS XL retained all of the New 3DS' features, without the 3D, that is.

This move was baffling, but suggested an underlying desire to just sell more systems. This may sound obvious, but in an era where Nintendo was absolutely unwilling to compromise on the Wii U's design whatsoever to cut the price, its blasé approach to the 3DS' core gimmick stood in stark contrast. Yet, it's emblematic of why 3DS is so special. Nintendo was willing to discard core pillars of the system's identity to get the machine into more hands. The company wanted to fight for each unit sold, bringing a competitive energy to the generation which truly began with that now-iconic price cut.

After all, a Nintendo with its back against the wall but a way forward is the most brilliant Nintendo that there is. This position brought us the Capcom Five and other GameCube curios. It brought the Blue Ocean strategy to the gaming market with the Wii, revolutionising (no pun intended) the industry in the process. And, it motivated 3DS, my favourite Nintendo handheld of all-time.

The system is remarkable only in part because of its against-all-odds recovery. The 3DS is home to one of the most compelling software libraries that Nintendo has ever curated. There is no clear ethos to its game selection. Unlike a system such as the N64 whose library hinges upon local multiplayer as its primary appeal, 3DS was defined by its variety. The machine became home to experimental reboots, new IP, straightforward sequels,



Capcom Five Four

Announced in 2002, Capcom agreed to bring five exclusive games to Nintendo's floundering GameCube console, in a grand show of support. Unfortunately only four of those games were ever released, with *Dead Phoenix* — a 3D shoot 'em up — being cancelled. Of the four games that did come to GameCube, only *P.N.03* remained exclusive to the console.

3DS CONSOLE VARIATIONS

There were seven different versions of the 3DS console itself, but many MANY more colour and pattern variations. The New Nintendo 3DS even had changeable faceplates, much like the Game Boy Micro. Here you'll find the pick of the crop.



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3DS Mario
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2011

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3DS Monster Hunter 3G
2013

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3DS XL Mario & Luigi: Dream Team
2013

138
3DS Peach
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2011

141
3DS Fire Emblem: Awakening
2012

144
3DS XL Animal Crossing: New Leaf
2012

139
3DS Toad
[Club Nintendo Exclusive]
2011

142
3DS Legend of Zelda 25th Anniversary
2011

145
3DS XL Super Smash Bros.
2014



You're Spoiling Us,
Mr. Ambassador!

The New Nintendo 3DS Ambassador Edition console was offered to Club Nintendo members on an invite-only basis. This edition was made available for purchase before the New Nintendo 3DS was available at retail, and included an exclusive faceplate, Super Smash Bros. faceplates and a charging cradle. Yours for £179.99... if you were selected!

operate on Wii's level, it could poach Wii's games.

2013 also had a little game called *Fire Emblem: Awakening*. Of all the 3DS' accomplishments, the revival of *Fire Emblem* is among the most important. What's now become a focal point of Nintendo's IP catalogue was once on the brink of death, revived by one one hell of a reboot. I played the demo on a whim one afternoon and was immediately captivated. The compelling characters, the deep SRPG gameplay — I was hooked by a genre that wasn't even on my radar. So, like millions of others, I purchased *Awakening* as my first title in the franchise. Now, we arguably have more *Fire Emblem* than we know what to do with.

There's little doubt in my mind that *Awakening's* demo was pivotal in its resurgent success — alongside the smart design changes which modernised the series, of course. But, the eShop's role in giving players a taste of *Fire Emblem's* action for free cannot be understated. The storefront, although late to the party, was bustling.

While laughable now, that shop felt cutting edge back in its heyday; full of demos, Virtual Console titles, and original IP. From *Dillion's Rolling Western* to *Harmoknight* and *Attack of the Friday Monsters! A Tokyo Tale* to *BOXBOY*, Nintendo was allowing its teams and second-party partners space to release diminutive games that filled out the digital shelves. Add in legacy content and easily-accessible trials of retail titles, and you were effectively experiencing what the DSi Shop wished it was.

Scrolling the eShop to the tune of its shopping theme before having your purchases wrapped up as digital gifts to open on the HOME Menu was so inviting, like the entire system itself. 3DS was a pocket-sized Nintendo oasis. From day one, the system just begged to be poked at, responding in little chirps and beeps as you explored its built-in apps, games, and augmented reality functionality. By the time themes and the *Badge Arcade* rolled out, you could customise the system to your

high-budget remakes, console ports and essential compilations.

And, these games operated at remarkably distinct tenors. 2012 brought us one of Nintendo's most impressive titles, *Kid Icarus: Uprising*. It's a brilliant game, a console-scale action title with competitive online multiplayer. *Uprising* would've felt vast on Wii, so bringing it to 3DS as a bold, early showcase of what the machine could do was an inspired move. *Kid Icarus* also served as a beacon of experimentation — a total reboot of an otherwise-forgotten IP that Sakurai began to develop edgewise in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*.

Uprising embodied a spirit of creative freedom which continued throughout 2013, arguably the system's best year. It exemplified why this machine was so brilliant. *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* was a big, iterative sequel stuffed with ideas that have cemented it as perhaps the best entry in its franchise. *Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D* established itself as the optimal way to play that 2010 Retro Studios reboot — proving that the system couldn't just



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3DS XL Theatrhythm Final Fantasy Curtain Call
2014

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3DS XL Pikachu
2013

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New 3DS XL Pikachu
2017

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3DS XL The Year of Luigi
2013

149
3DS XL Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth
2014

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New 3DS XL Pokémon Sun and Moon
2016

heart’s content. I certainly did. Even without a game in the cartridge slot, the 3DS was just delightful to mess around with — a reminder of Nintendo’s commitment to fun.

Yet, it all comes back to the games. We can’t discuss 3DS without mentioning *Pokémon* and its major sales influence that began in 2013. Nor can we forget the irreverence of *Tomodachi Life*, or the excellence of *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*. I’d be remiss to overlook the bite-sized fun of *Ultimate NES Remix*, or the impressive HD console ports like *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*. But then where do I fit in *Monster Hunter*?! Cataloguing the broad strokes of the 3DS library is an exercise in futility, it’s impressive in both its depth and breadth.

But, that well ran too deep for some, as 3DS sputtered in death as it did at release. The system, Nintendo’s sole viable lifeline if the Switch failed like the Wii U, received continued support into the former’s lifecycle. Given the hybrid’s meteoric success, lingering on 3DS was a mistake in retrospect. In the moment though, the portable’s 60+ million players were an invaluable asset. Yet, when everyone’s eyes were on Switch, anything that trickled to 3DS was an object of ire.

We all bemoaned *Metroid: Samus Returns* being announced for the system in June of 2017, and such sentiments only became louder throughout the coming eighteen months. By the time *Kirby’s Extra Epic Yarn* released in early 2019, seemingly everyone was against the machine. For most, it was well past time to move on. The 3DS had outstayed its welcome, and each new 3DS announcement was met with the same criticism: “why isn’t this on Switch?” Unfortunately, this left the portable’s final titles to wallow away at the hands of a frustrated community, all eyes fixed on the newer, much more attractive system.

I was certainly one of them. The 3DS got me through the highs and lows of middle school, and it remains charged and on my desk today. But its time had long come by 2019, and even the diehards like myself couldn’t be motivated to play the majority of its post-Switch releases. Apparently brilliant IPs like *Ever Oasis* floundered as otherwise promising remakes struggled to sell hundreds of thousands of copies.

There were a disproportionate number of misses in the 3DS’ later years, but high-quality titles nonetheless released still. However, these too were often dismissed. We wouldn’t have *Metroid Dread* without *Samus Returns*, but that title could only shift about half a million copies. The door had been closed on 3DS.

Sentiment cooled on the system, and with the eShop’s closure we’re left with a melancholic sense of finality. 3DS is done. Its life was a popularity bell curve, finding its moment in the sun between two absolutes: disinterest and disdain. But, what a bright moment that was. From Fall of 2011 through 2016, the 3DS was never further than my backpack. It bottled everything that’s brilliant about the company into a little machine that was full of hardware bits and bobs brought forth just to make you smile.

Its game library touched nearly every Nintendo franchise, keeping each player engaged across every genre and scale. Although it topped out at about half of DS’ install base, the system’s recovery after launch was nothing short of miraculous. 3DS proved that Nintendo could still fight. And, it reminded us how lovely it can be to have our favourite digital friends sequestered behind 240p dedicated screens at a time when conventional wisdom said gaming had gone mobile. It didn’t set the world ablaze. But, peak 3DS was peak Nintendo, full stop.

The Guild

Guild01 and Guild02 were selections of bite-sized games created by famed Japanese developers in cooperation with Level-5. These were initially released as individual digital purchases in the eShop, but the Guild01 games also received a physical release in Japan. Guild01 contained the games Aero Porter, Weapon Shop de Omasse, Crimson Shroud, and the Suda51 produced game Liberation Maiden. Guild02 was comprised of The Starship Damrey, Attack of the Friday Monsters! and the Kenji Inafune produced game Bugs vs. Tanks!



152
New 3DS XL Hyrule Edition
2015

154
New 3DS LL Super Famicom Edition [Japan Exclusive]
2016

156
2DS XL Hylian Shield
2018

153
3DS XL Tomodachi Life
2013

155
2DS XL Dragon Quest Metal Slime Edition
2017

157
2DS XL Poké Ball Edition
2017

158
2DS XL Pikachu
2017

161
2DS Super Mario Maker
2018

164
2DS Crystal Red
2016

159
2DS XL Minecraft
2018

162
2DS The Legend of Zelda
2017

165
2DS Crystal Blue
2016

160
2DS XL Animal Crossing
2018

163
2DS Pokémon Sun and Moon
2016

166
2DS Crystal Yellow
2016



152



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153



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174



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175



176



171



172



177



178

167
Nintendo 3DS
2011

169
New Nintendo 3DS LL [Super Famicom Edition]
2016

171
New Nintendo 3DS XL
2015

168
Nintendo 3DS XL
2012

170
New Nintendo 3DS
2015

172
New Nintendo 2DS XL
2017

173
Nintendo 3DS
[Monster Hunter 3G Bundle]
2011

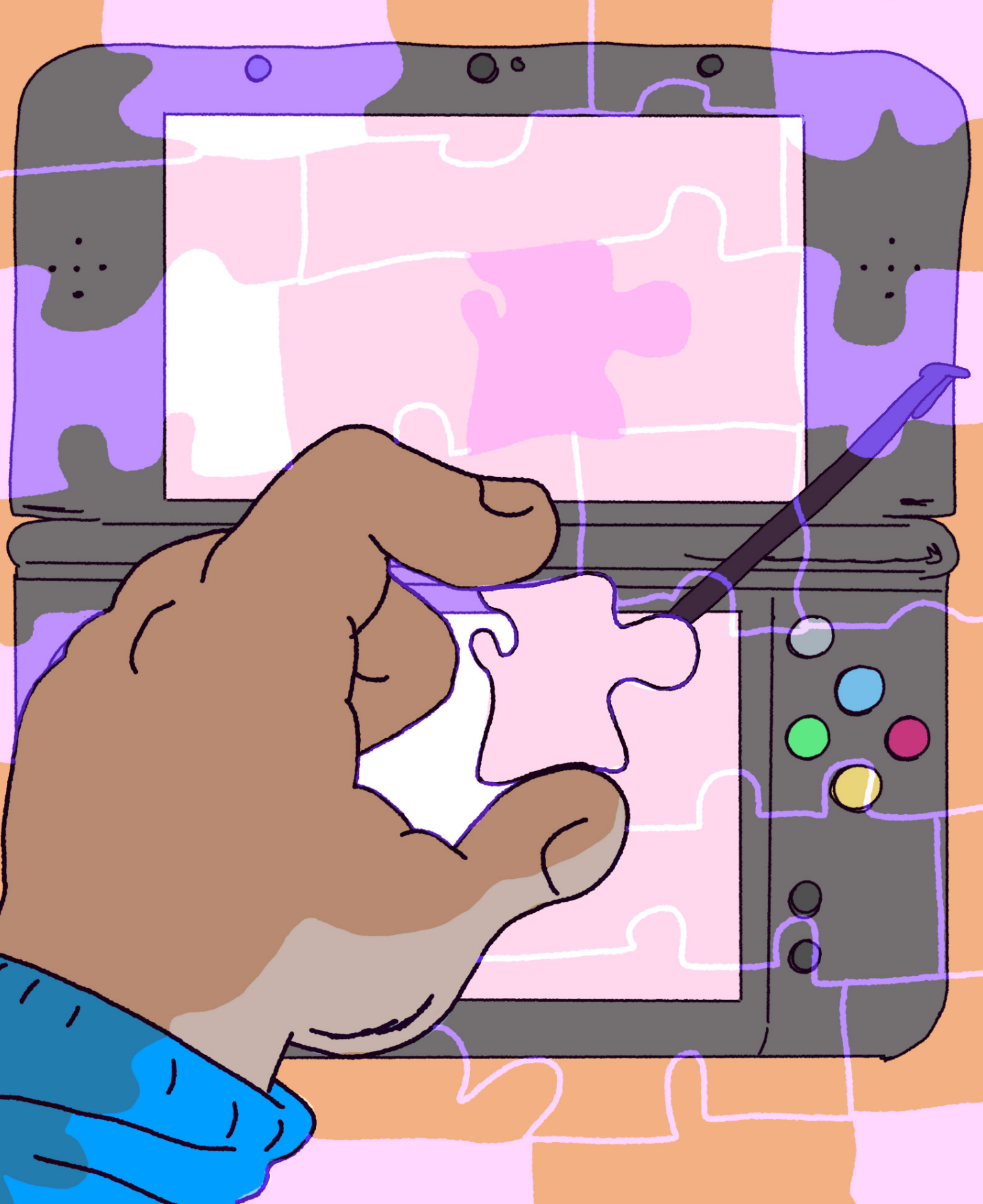
175
Nintendo 2DS
[Pokémon Yellow Version Bundle]
2016

177
New Nintendo 3DS XL
[Samus Edition]
2017

174
Nintendo 3DS XL
[Super Mario 3D Land Bundle]
2012

176
New Nintendo 3DS
[Mario 30th Anniversary Special Edition]
2015

178
New Nintendo 2DS XL
[Hylian Shield Edition]
2018



BETWEEN LOVE AND GUILT.

The ways to express our passion for gaming are multiple. Some will dress up as their favourite characters, trying to look as true to the original design as possible while still having fun. Others learn how to create their own games or spend hours playing games to entertain massive audiences, sharing special and important moments of their most treasured games on social media. In my case, collecting is one of the ways I found to communicate my affection for games. For me, gathering different titles and consoles is an act towards reconciling old needs now that adulthood is nothing but a fact. Collecting is a gesture of kindness, not only to objects, but to ourselves. On the other hand, it can become a real challenge to keep up with games from a console that is at the end of its life cycle.

It took me longer than I had planned, but in 2018, during my first trip to the United States, I was able to fulfil an old desire: to buy a 3DS. After visiting the first Walmart I went to, I left with my new purple 3DS and *Mario Kart 7*. The happiness of finally having the console was mixed with the weird feeling of having paid way less than I would have in my own country. It has been only four years since I finally got my hands on it, but I am still extremely fond of my 3DS. Though I wasn't able to buy the console when it first released, when I was only 15 years old, as an adult I am finally able to own some of the great titles I had always heard about.

Is The Price Right?

*Following the global pandemic of 2020, used video game prices started to rise. The 3DS was especially affected by this, with games such as *Yo-Kai Watch 3* going from £20 all the way up to £115 as of July 2022. Games published by Atlus are especially pricey, with a copy of *Etrian Odyssey Nexus* costing around £100, and *Shin Megami Tensei IV: Apocalypse* coming in at an eye-watering £160.*

In 2020, Nintendo announced that the Nintendo 3DS was being discontinued after almost a decade on the market. Two years later the company also announced that the digital store would be closed as well. When I bought the console, I gave the process of growing my collection some thought, but not enough. I knew it wouldn't be a walk in the park, considering the 3DS was a pretty old console already. However, I hadn't considered the conditions of Brazil in terms of access to older games and all the different factors at play that would set the range of prices I was going to find.

Once I had to face reality, my desire to experience the full potential of the 3DS was confronted with important questions, such as just how special having this console really was for me, as well as how much I thought would be acceptable to pay for a game now that I take care of a house. Starting a collection of 3DS games during the past couple of years has been an experience that can be summarised as a race against time. Not only are the means to acquire new games basically disappearing, but for people living in countries like Brazil buying second-hand games has become the equivalent of spending almost half of our minimum wage. The challenges I faced and keep facing in trying to collect as much as I can for the 3DS now are as much personal as socio-economic.

FROM A FOND MEMORY TO A CURRENT DESIRE

Every item I get for my collection ends up falling in one of two major categories — games or consoles. These are things that I want to have because of nostalgia or because I judge them as significant examples of specific genres, part of my academic interest in games. Some PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4 titles I have are solely for the sake of having them for future consumption. But, without a doubt, the 3DS falls into the nostalgia category.

When the 3DS was released, I remember going to the mall with friends and visiting a bookstore where consoles were displayed for people to try out. Every now and then you would find a *Zelda* game in the slot, but most times only *Super Mario 3D Land* was playable. Not having to use a pair of weird glasses to see the 3D effect was a feature that really amazed me at the time. Something about its size also attracted me. It was easy to picture myself carrying it in one of my jacket pockets, sitting in one of the many corners of my school and playing games during the break.

In spite of how cool having a handheld like this could be, my relationship with Nintendo’s portables began when I was even younger, with a *Pokémon Red* cartridge. During my childhood, a tradition was instituted of receiving, from time to time, a box with a mix of things sent by an aunt living in Japan. From different types of candy that she would find, to my cousin’s old *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, there was always something interesting for me and my sister. In one of these boxes, she sent us a broken Super Famicom and some games. Among these home console goodies, we found an official copy of *Pokémon Red*. I wish the only problem we had was the fact the game was in Japanese, but I also didn’t have a Game Boy to play it on.

Considering the minimum monthly wage in Brazil around the end of the ‘90s and the beginning of the 2000s was 136 Brazilian Reais, Game Boys were much too expensive. You could find a Game Boy Color with *Pokémon Pinball* costing around 400 Brazilian Reais, the equivalent to over twelve weeks of work if you could save everything you earned, which is hardly a realistic proposition for anyone, including my parents. Thankfully, my father sympathised enough with the situation that he agreed to buy me the Super Game Boy, a cartridge you could use in a Super Nintendo to play Game Boy games. However, even though I was able to play *Pokémon Red* (and *Yellow* too — my favourite), obtaining a portable console became a real desire for me.

The Nintendo 3DS took the place of the Game Boy once I was in my teens, and the desire to have one was still there by the time I was considered an adult. Through the years, I learned by talking with friends who had the console (or reading on the internet) that not only was it technologically incredible, but its library was known as an amazing source of hidden gems, as well as well-established JRPGs — the genre I got hooked on with *Final Fantasy IX* and haven’t stopped playing or collecting since. With a 3DS, I could finally own a copy of *Chrono Trigger* and even some new versions of classic *Final Fantasy* games. There were titles I had only heard about and was extremely curious to try, such as *Etrian Odyssey* and *Shin Megami Tensei IV*. So many good games I hadn’t had the opportunity to play before. Now it was only a matter of time before I could dive into these games, or so I thought.

IT CAN ALWAYS GET MORE DIFFICULT

With a 3DS finally in my pocket, my next goal was to buy games for it. Getting my first few physical copies was an easy feat during my trip. Besides the fact that they were significantly cheaper when converting the currencies, the number of stores selling new or used games in the USA was way higher than I was used to at home. All it took was going to one mall to find a brand-new copy of *Persona Q2* and used copies of *Bravely Default*, as well as *Dragon Quest VIII*. This was amazing, but I would still have to face reality because while I was thrilled with the possibilities ahead of me, I now had to figure out how I would be able to access such games from Brazil.

At first, the main challenge I had was to actually find the games. Unlike the US we don’t have big franchise game stores in Brazil, to which people sell their old games. Actually, game stores are way less common here and very few of them have been investing in buying and selling 3DS games since 2018. Nintendo had left Brazil in 2015 (returning in 2020 to sell the Nintendo Switch nationally) so acquiring games for their platforms has often been a matter of finding a supplier abroad and also dealing with taxes, as well as the difference between currencies. Talking to some members of staff from a big store in the city I live in, they explained to me how expensive importing some games could be. To make any profit from it, the store would have to add 100 to 150 Brazilian Reais to its price. This scenario made it clear to me that my best option was to look for new or second-hand copies sold on the internet.

The internet, as you well know, is a big place. It just so happens that when you are looking for certain games to be shipped to Brazil, it becomes much smaller than it appears. After preparing the list of games I wanted with titles from the *Dragon Quest* series, *Chrono Trigger*, and the *Shin Megami Tensei* games, I started my research in earnest. Finding new copies would be the best scenario, though an unlikely one. The biggest problem was that buying from places like the famous Playasia, where I did find some of the games I wanted, would imply the risk of paying importation fees, which can be around 60% of the item’s price, plus local taxes, on top of the shipping fee. A game might cost 250 to 300 Brazilian Reais on the online store, but would end up costing 600 to 700 (or more) by the time it was in my hands.

Since buying from stores outside my country was so overwhelmingly expensive, my next step was to go to the national online market of second-hand games. Due to the lack of stores where people would willingly go to sell games they don’t want anymore, I needed to keep constantly vigilant on the internet in case someone, anywhere in the country, would post an old 3DS game for sale. Daily visits to Mercado Livre’s site (an Argentine

TecToy Mega Drive

Founded in 1987, TecToy started life as an importer of electronic goods into Brazil. They formed a good relationship with Sega, releasing their consoles in the region. They went on to port and develop original games for Sega systems, and eventually started reproducing classic Sega systems under license. They were still manufacturing a version of the Mega Drive as of 2017.

company that is pretty similar to eBay, and quite big in Brazil) became part of my morning routine. I had just finished *Dragon Quest VIII*, so I was excited to play the previous games to see how they changed during the years, which became a problem since I needed someone who, for whatever reason, wanted to get rid of their copy. This sounds simple, but it definitely was not. Through Mercado Livre, I was capable of obtaining these games, but it took me months of constant observation and a little bit of luck. This little collection also ended up costing a very questionable amount of money.

Even though the regular game market takes advantage of nostalgia and players’ personal relationships with certain games to make a profit, the second-hand market amplifies that. Add the value of the demand for a not-so-common item to a person’s attachment for an old game and you will eventually see people asking for an outrageous amount of money for a copy of something like *Dragon Quest IX*. I once saw someone selling a copy of *Chrono Trigger* on the DS for 1,900 Brazilian Reais, the equivalent of two months of rent in some regions of my city today.

My *Dragon Quest* collection was the only case where I allowed myself to spend more money on a game than I thought I should. More specifically, *Dragon Quest V: Hand of the Heavenly Bride* was by far the most difficult one to find. I would usually find copies being sold for around 800 Brazilian Reais. Just to put it into perspective, the minimum monthly wage in Brazil is, at the time of writing, 1,212 Brazilian Reais. Thanks to my almost pathological obsession for checking Mercado Livre every day (and sometimes more than once during the day) I found a copy for 500 Brazilian Reais. Cheaper, but still rather heavy on the pocket. After a week of thinking about whether I should spend this money, and talking to my partner about whether this purchase would compromise our bills or any other financial responsibility we had, I decided to buy it. The moment was a mixture of happiness and guilt.

That game cost me the equivalent of one-third of my rent. Having it meant I would complete my collection



of such an amazing JRPG series and be able to play an important title. On the other hand, it was hard to avoid reflecting on if it was reasonable to spend almost half of someone’s monthly salary on. Sure, each one of us knows how much games are worth, as well as our own limits when it comes to finances. At the same time, I don’t know if my passion can totally justify these prices since they are not simply a matter of being rare or not. Some prices are the result of the politics of companies regarding preserving their games, making them accessible in the future. Such a thing, in places like Brazil, where games were already hard to find even when the console was still being manufactured, makes having a 3DS a challenging hobby.

At the end of the day, my 3DS collection still fills me with pride. I was capable of obtaining a considerable number of the titles I wanted to, and I love all the ones I have already played. Although I got mine when the 3DS era was about to end, this hasn’t prevented me from enjoying the amazing experiences that games like *Dragon Quest V* and *Bravely Default* can offer. By having the console and navigating these difficulties just to buy games for the system, I have managed to satisfy an old desire. Can you imagine how amazed the younger me would be knowing that we finally have a 3DS and can look pretty cool playing it while waiting for someone to arrive at the mall? The difficulties in obtaining the console and the games, plus the important questions that came up while searching for them, make me value my collection more than money.

between love and guilt.



A NEW DIMENSION.

In a time when childhood meant only one or maybe two televisions in the house, when there were always parents or siblings to compete with for access, handhelds were our gateway to gaming. They weren't the big screen in the corner of the room you'd all gather around, they were *your* screen, meant for your eyes only. It's hard to remember it now, with our houses full of televisions, tablets, and mobile phones — each one filled with your pick of games and streaming apps — but back then it was every person for themselves.

But even if you could get time on the big television, there was still always something magnetic about a handheld gaming device. They're like a good book that lets you curl up in your favourite chair, away from everyone else, and escape into another realm. They're much more intimate than gaming on a television as their tiny screens have to be held up close to your face.

Nintendo has always understood this. The Game Boy was packaged with *Tetris*, a game with a hypnotic force that drew you in completely, shutting out the world, ghost blocks continuing to fall even as you slept. The DS even allowed you to hold it like a book, designed to bring in new audiences with its casual software like *Brain Training*.

There's been a long history of Nintendo's love of using its hardware to create magic tricks (or gimmicks, if you're feeling more curmudgeonly). Ever since the Super Nintendo and Game Boy Advance, it's never been enough to just do the same again, but with more power. The N64 gave us the analogue stick, the DS had two screens. The Wii ushered in motion controls, while the Wii U tried using a second screen to create new gameplay experiences on your home console. And the Switch, well, the Switch conquered all with its hybrid, play anywhere approach. Nintendo's innovations aren't always successful, but when they do work, they can change gaming forever.

This brings us to the successor of the hugely popular Nintendo DS handheld. How do you follow up on a console that sold over 150 million units? Perhaps Nintendo was paying attention to James Cameron's progress with the groundbreaking 3D film *Avatar* — it released in December 2009 and still remains the highest-grossing movie of all time. The movie kickstarted a wave of interest in 3D, which became 'The Next Big Thing™' that television manufacturers insisted we needed. The only problem was that people soon realised that wearing the 3D glasses was a pretty annoying thing to have to do, not to mention the impact on the film's brightness. Furthermore, while *Avatar* used ground-breaking techniques, Hollywood did its level best to ruin any enthusiasm by releasing endless bad 3D films, with the 3D effect applied in post-production to create a weird pop-up book look in many of them.

Still, all the apathy came later — for a time it felt as though 3D would be the future of cinema (if not home cinema). So perhaps it is no surprise that for the follow-up to the DS, Nintendo chose to go down the 3D route. But this is Nintendo remember, so it couldn't possibly just do the normal kind of 3D. It had to surprise. And surprised we were when in 2010 Nintendo unveiled the 3DS, built around glasses-free 3D.

I remember reading about it after it was first announced and just thinking "how?". It sounded like a trick, something that couldn't possibly work. Surely if it were possible someone else would have done it by now? But this was Nintendo, and they understood that handheld gaming screens are meant for one set of eyes only.

Three D

Autostereoscopy, or glasses-free 3D, is the method the 3DS uses to achieve its eponymous effect. A parallax barrier (comprised of a liquid crystal display in this case) is utilised in front of the image to create slits that allow each eye to see a different image, creating the 3D effect.

So how does the 3D effect work? Magic.

The effect couldn't be demonstrated or shown online; you had to see it for yourself. We read excited previews from journalists who got to try it out early, and they confirmed that yes, it did indeed work. When I finally saw it for myself it *still* didn't seem real. It's like when a magician shows you a trick and leaves you smiling, scratching your head at how they did it. Unlike 3D with glasses, which creates images that pop out of the screen, the 3DS creates images with depth. You can see through into the top screen, beyond the flat panel into a landscape beyond. There is a clever tech-based answer to how it works, but I'm content to attribute it to Nintendo magic.

Just as the Game Boy allowed us to disappear into worlds like *Link's Awakening's* Koholint Island, the 3DS gave us the power of these miniature worlds that lived in our hands, and then allowed us a window into them. The top screen is like a portal you can look through, into tiny game worlds conjured into life. The 3D effect is targeted in a fairly narrow spot, so it really is for your eyes only — look at the screen from any other angle and it's just a blur — but that's not an issue for a handheld.

Looking at it in the present, some of the nicest use of the 3D comes with the 3DS's menu screen. It's full of such personality and charm, a far cry from the Switch's utilitarian approach. Each piece of software you select on the bottom screen menu throws up a 3D image to the top screen, like a 3D hologram from a science fiction movie. The eShop sees a couple of shopping bags lazily float about in zero gravity. The Activity Log has tiny pencils that spin around a notepad — the fixed notepad in the middle distance helping the pencils to really pop as they move behind and in front of it. There are tiny 3D renders of the classic virtual consoles — a miniature NES hovering in the air in front of an old television. Many of the games display a small diorama scene from the game — *Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask* being a particularly lovely one. The 3D makes looking at it all a wonder before you even open anything.

Included with the console was a set of Augmented Reality (AR) cards, which allow for further neat tricks before you get on to the games. Character cards summon an amiibo-like figure of some of Nintendo's best-known characters, which you can set into different poses. The console also has two front-facing cameras, which allow you to take 3D photos. The Question Block card is the real ace in the pack though — putting it down on a table makes targets appear on screen. Shoot those and the surface of the table opens up and unfolds, a dragon emerging from inside.

The 3DS struggled initially — while it offered a great trick, it only went so far, and there were no decent games at launch that really sold the console. *Pilotwings Resort* did its usual job of tech-demoing new hardware, allowing

you a serene trip around a volcanic island. But beyond the hardcore, no one was rushing out to buy new hardware just to play a *Pilotwings* game.

It took *Super Mario 3D Land's* arrival — the launch game it should have had — along with a significant price cut, to really kick things off. And in the same way that *Mario 64* showed us what the analogue stick was able to do, it was *3D Land* that demonstrated exactly why 3D made a difference. Its levels are a hybrid of the open 3D arena and 2D course levels, which are a great fit for handheld play, while also showing off the 3D effect much more than a traditional side-scroller ever could.

All of a sudden, we were able to see into the Mushroom Kingdom. *Mario's* chunky graphics translate brilliantly to 3D and it really felt as though you were looking down into a whole world. The 3D allowed you to jump about, without having to rely on a shadowy spot on the ground to show you where you would land. There were fantastically vertical levels, which often ended in Mario taking a thrilling leap of faith down to a flagpole below. Other levels featured enclosed spaces, like the sewer levels that felt like small playsets for Mario to run around in. The level select screen also has beautiful cuboid models of each level you're about to jump into, which naturally float and spin in the air.

There were many other games that did a great job of demonstrating the fun impact 3D could have on a game, too. *Luigi's Mansion 2* (subtitled *Dark Moon* in the US) gave you a series of mansions to explore and poke about in. Each room you enter is a complete delight of tiny details that are easier to see and inspect in 3D. Nintendo always ensured you were rewarded with a reaction whichever corner you poked about in. Playing the game feels very much like poking your nose through a doll's house window.

Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater 3D is the closest you will probably ever get to a *Metal Gear Solid* VR game (which just broke my heart to realise), as you crawl through the jungle floor with long grass and tree branches brushing past your eyes. *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* hosted vertical dungeons — as you moved up the floors you could see the previous ones below you. *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D* made a classic experience new again, giving us the wonder of seeing well-known places in a whole new light — literally seeing Hyrule Field stretch out into the distance recreates that same sense of wonder I had the very first time I played back on the N64. Even 2D games got in on the act; *Metroid: Samus Returns* employed a more subtle integration, featuring side-scrolling levels with layered depth, creating the illusion of an expansive world behind your field of play — a trick *Metroid Dread* also used on Switch, without the magic of the 3DS screen.

Despite lots of enjoyable uses, just as in cinema, the use of 3D eventually fell out of favour with audiences. Why

did it ultimately fall away? Probably the most important reason is that it doesn't ultimately change gameplay in a meaningful way. It makes you see things in a different light, and even though that creates a wonderful and tangible connection with the action, the gameplay itself isn't fundamentally altered.

There's also the awkward success of 2DS, which Nintendo later released, pulling the rug out from under glasses-free 3D. It's true that opticians advised parents to turn off the 3D effect as it could damage the development of children's eyes, which is never the sort of thing that a parent wants to hear. The screen was also quite fussy — until the updated 'New 3DS', it had a narrow field of vision that easily broke, taking the immersion with it. Many also simply found the effect uncomfortable or tiring on their eyes, turning the effect down or off completely.

As with cinema, 3D games also asked for a higher commitment from developers. To really succeed, games needed to be built around the 3D design. If a developer just wanted to make a regular game on 3DS, integrating 3D became a hurdle they realised they could do away with and use the resources elsewhere. Nintendo themselves set aside the use of the 3D — as the years went on it allowed them to squeeze extra power out of the machine, at less of a cost now that so many 2DS consoles had been sold.

Despite Nintendo themselves winding down support and then leaving it behind entirely on the Switch, the 3DS still contains a large library of games, nearly all of which give us unique experiences that can only be seen at their best on the 3DS. From a preservation point of view, this is a really important system and set of games, and it's a shame how hard it is to buy some of the physical software now, without even touching on the system's digital eShop.

Nintendo's ethos is built around its hardware facilitating new, interesting, and fun experiences. In my view, the 3DS fully nailed that. Even if it didn't represent a long-term direction for Nintendo, that shouldn't be seen as a negative. They wrung every bit of magic out of a glasses-free, 3D handheld system, throwing every idea they could at us. Once those ideas were exhausted, they didn't continue to repeat the same trick over and over again, they simply moved on. The 3DS gave them a canvas to paint on for years, while they were dreaming up their next innovation.

Technology moves on — 3D was set aside and VR became 'The Next Big Thing™'. The 3DS is to handheld consoles what VR is to home consoles: a way of breaking down part of the barrier between player and avatar. Playing on the 3DS is like looking through a keyhole into new worlds, VR is like stepping through the door. But when you are snuggled up in that cosy nook, sometimes all you need is that view into another world anyway.

If At First You Don't Succeed...

Another invention from the mind of Gunpei Yokoi, the Virtual Boy was Nintendo's first commercial attempt at creating a 3D console. The console was designed to sit on a tabletop while the player looked into the visor and used an attached controller. It's black and red aesthetic is infamous, as is the fact that it was incredibly uncomfortable to play, causing many to feel nauseous or even vomit. Not surprisingly the Virtual Boy was a flop — selling less than a million units — beating the Wii U to the title of Nintendo's worst-selling home console.





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KIRBY: PLANET ROBOTOT.

One of the most charming, playful, and powerful characters in Nintendo’s repertoire, Kirby has been a source of joy since the ‘90s. There are plenty of through lines within the franchise in terms of the world, lore, and its classic cast of enemies. But to me what really makes Kirby, well, Kirby is the fact that he can be and do anything.

Sure, some Copy Abilities are more iconic than others, but in any given game something new and strange will come to the forefront. That’s the magic of Kirby. So when he jumped into a souped-up mech to take on foes in *Kirby: Planet Robobot*, it was all I never knew I needed. A cute, pink puffball with the power to lift giant bricks, punch through walls, and scan blazing creatures to set the world on fire. The mech breathed new life into the Copy Ability mechanic allowing you to give the machine new properties the same way Kirby can transform, while also allowing for traditional copying too — it was fun, fresh, and futuristic. Much like Kirby, the mech was badass but also adorable, with the ability to decorate it with cute stickers you collected throughout the world.

Kirby: Planet Robobot’s mechanical look throughout the levels felt foreign in a way that gave this game a unique identity in a storied franchise. And it made for some interesting electrical engineering puzzles that had Kirby doing everything from moving wires with brute force to sparking and carrying battery packs across train cars. Using the robotic arm to turn screws and move mechanisms was also just a cool way to manipulate the area and unearth surprises. At the same time, each world had its own environmental motif that maintained the whimsy and weirdness Kirby games are known for. *Kirby: Planet Robobot* is a game where you can explore an ice cream factory while equipped with the power of a doctor who can hit people with a clipboard, and I love it for that.

In keeping with the style of many 3DS hits, *Kirby: Planet Robobot* had you exploring across both the foreground and background of levels. The depth of it all was a visual delight but also invited you to explore more thoughtfully. It also lent itself well to visual gags like a giant mechanical cylinder pushing Kirby into the screen, creating fake cracks in your 3DS screen.

This game exudes creativity while also having compelling level design with a wealth of secrets to uncover. This franchise is at its best when the new twists it puts on familiar concepts feel like the coolest thing they’ve done yet. To this day *Kirby: Planet Robobot* remains one of my favourites in the series, and while I’m always ready for Kirby’s next schtick, I still think about getting into a hefty, pink suit of robotic armour and beaming through everything that gets in my way. There’s a charm and hope in Kirby that keeps me coming back, but best of all there’s a surprisingly deep well of power and *Kirby: Planet Robobot* showcases that beautifully.

LUIGI’S MANSION: DARK MOON.

Starting as a GameCube launch game, the *Luigi’s Mansion* series has always been a bit of an oddity and niche within Nintendo’s library. Still, it has an audience and it’s one that was thrilled to see this game officially become a franchise with its 3DS release: *Luigi’s Mansion: Dark Moon*.

Like any sequel, *Dark Moon* had the challenge of building on an established formula. And on that front it was successful. Not only does *Luigi’s Mansion: Dark Moon* have more content, allowing you to explore multiple mansions, but it also improves one of the weakest elements of the previous game: the controls. While *Luigi’s Mansion* was always about brains over brawn, with players exploring spooky environments and using their vacuum-like Poltergust 3000 for ghost-sucking and puzzle-solving, *Dark Moon* gives Luigi a bit more physicality and a better toolset.

Stunning ghosts was now done with a strobe flash instead of just the flashlight — this felt easier and clearer than before thanks to the beam’s wide scope. Best of all, Luigi could now jump while capturing a ghost to dodge incoming attacks, decreasing the chance of getting constantly interrupted during combat. *Luigi’s Mansion: Dark Moon* was as much about improving what worked as it was changing what didn’t. This is most evident with the addition of the Dark-Light Device, which shines a rainbow-coloured light to reveal hidden things like Boo paths and invisible objects.

Like many 3DS titles, the second screen was really just the map, but in a game that’s all about exploration and looking for secrets, having the mansion layout at the ready was more than welcome.

Narratively, things kick off when King Boo shatters the Dark Moon, putting all the ghosts under his control and scattering the pieces which — in classic video game fashion — Luigi has to find. While the original mansion had plenty of environmental surprises, the new multiple mansion structure allowed for more differentiated identities across regions. The only downside to this structure is that things were broken down further into levels, which felt a bit limiting in terms of holistic exploration.

And, of course, one of the best contributions *Dark Moon* made to the franchise was introducing us to Polterpup: an adorable ghost dog who mischievously steals important keys that Luigi has to hunt down. He’s best boy but also best ghost. Polterpup does more than look cute, though. Using Gold Bones allows Polterpup to bring you back to life after losing all your HP. Adorable and practical, Polterpup is a true friend.

179
Kirby: Planet Robobot
2016

180
Luigi’s Mansion: Dark Moon
2013



NINTENDO SWITCH.

First Released:
2017

Manufacturer:
Nintendo

Launch Price:
JP ¥29,980
US \$299.99
UK £279.99

Switch Game Card

Switch game cards come in 1GB, 2GB, 4GB, 8GB, 16GB, 32GB and 64GB flavours. Please don't taste them though — they're pretty terrible.

I'd consider my relationship with the Nintendo Switch to be pretty unique. Before its release, faith in Nintendo was at an all time low. The Wii U was a failure commercially, but also a disappointment to some of the most die-hard Nintendo fans. It had some fantastic games that, unfortunately, went largely overlooked due to the Wii U's small install base, and the second screen experience felt shoe-horned into most games on the platform. All anybody ever wanted was to be able to disconnect that oversized controller/tablet and use it by itself. In fact, I played a lot of Wii U with the TV turned off, tethered within the bounds of the tablet's wireless connection. Luckily, my bathroom was within those bounds. Playing *Super Mario 3D World* on my toilet felt like I was in the future.

And that's what made the idea of the Nintendo Switch so great. It would be truly untethered Nintendo gaming, the likes we've only ever seen at low graphical fidelity and resolution. Now, I can play *Super Mario 3D World* on ANY toilet.

Way back in 2016, the rumour mill was churning with whispers of Nintendo's next console, which they internally code named the 'NX'. Anybody in the gaming community with their ear to the ground knew Nintendo's next console was right around the corner, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to posit what exactly that hardware might look like. The company seemed to show no interest in flexing its graphical power like the other big console manufacturers, and Nintendo's largest successes in the years prior had been from their portable hardware. Plus, the concepts introduced by the Wii U showed a clear direction in their design philosophy.

This is where my relationship to the Nintendo Switch becomes unique. Around 2015, I was a very small content creator and an avid Nintendo/retro gaming fan. I would have loved nothing more than to see Nintendo bounce back from their accumulating losses. I began covering what would soon become known as the NX on my YouTube

channel, and speculating what that rumoured console might be like. There was a lot of hype around this device, a device that no one was even sure was a real, tangible thing. Fans were starved for content, trying to find out anything they could about Nintendo's next move. And it sure was fun to gather around our keyboards and speculate.

It all came to a head on October 20th of 2016 when Nintendo dropped their bombshell 'First Look' trailer for the Nintendo Switch. The video currently has almost 50 MILLION views on their North American YouTube channel at the time of writing. The rumours were [mostly] true: Nintendo was making a home and portable console hybrid. This trailer served as a way to dump more fuel onto the hype-fire, gathering more interest from dormant Nintendo fans and even mainstream audiences who don't even know what 'a Nintendo' is.

This was great news for Nintendo, but also great news for content creators in this space. Because of my previous speculation videos, the algorithm was very kind to me in the timespan between that Nintendo Switch announcement and the eventual release of the console on March 3rd 2017. In fact, this massive surge of interest birthed a whole community of what I call 'Nintendo Switch YouTubers' — people like Spawn Wave, RGT 85, Kevin Kenson, BeatEmUps, Arlo, Austin John Plays, and so many more (that I'm going to get in trouble for not including).

Around the time of launch, the Nintendo Switch was lambasted by critics. Some said its ability to 'switch' between handheld and home TV use was just a gimmick. Some said its detachable Joy-Con would inevitably fail at the rails. The biggest ammunition critics had was the Nintendo Switch's lack of games. After all, console hardware is pretty much useless if there are no good games to play on it. The Nintendo Switch launched with a measly 6 physical games. If you happened to walk by the Switch section at your local game store around this time you'd probably know it wasn't looking good. But there were a smattering of digital-only games, most-



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**Nintendo Switch OLED
Kirby Mouthful Mode box**
[JP exclusive]
2022



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182
**Nintendo Switch
Labo Creators Contest Edition**
[Reverse]
2018

ly from indie developers, that padded the release to a still-meagre 13 (ish) titles at launch. Most of these games were already available on other consoles, further adding to critics’ compounding disappointment. There were also some weak games in the lineup. *1-2-Switch* was a great tech demo for the Switch’s core functionality — still to this day it serves as the best showcase for the Joy-Con’s HD Rumble feature. It’s my opinion that *1-2-Switch* would have been a fantastic pop-culture staple similar to the likes of *Wii Sports* if it were just packed in with or pre-installed on every Nintendo Switch console. Instead the \$49.99 asking price and limited content made it unworthy of most fan’s libraries.

On March 3rd 2017, the star of the show was *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Of the Switch’s limited launch lineup, it turned out to be the only game they needed to start the Switch’s lifecycle off with an ear-shattering BANG. It sold so well that the Switch version of the game (it also launched for the Wii U on the same day) was reported to have sold more copies than there were Switch units in the wild. People must have been buying *Breath of the Wild* in anticipation for their future Switch consoles. *Breath of the Wild* was even a top selling game, month after month, for over a year after its launch. It was the perfect game to hold the attention of Switch players with its roughly 50-100 hour campaign. There’s so much to do in *Breath of the Wild* that a large swath of players would spend thousands of hours just messing about in the world.

Without *Breath of the Wild*, I’m not sure Nintendo would have been able to capture such a large install base, and keep them interested during the extremely slow drip feed of games in 2017. But if *Zelda* wasn’t enough to convert you into a Switch owner, *Mario* certainly would be. *Super Mario Odyssey* released later that same year. Both *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Super Mario Odyssey* are tied for the top-rated Nintendo Switch game of all time on Metacritic to this day, even though they both came out the year the Nintendo Switch launched. They’re still the first games that I recommend to new Switch owners all these years later.

The failures of the Wii U had third party publishers sceptical of the Nintendo Switch’s success. It took a few years for large developers like Ubisoft and EA to fully commit to putting their more popular titles on the Switch. It also didn’t help that the Switch was severely underpowered. I mean, at the time it seemed beefy enough for a \$300 portable Nintendo console, but with the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One in their sunset years, the Nintendo Switch was quickly falling behind in technical ability. Nintendo has had problems with third party developers in the past, of course. The Nintendo Wii often received half-baked ports of big budget AAA games. Those developers either couldn’t be bothered to put the money into the port, or faced major technical hurdles trying to squeeze every ounce of GPU

power they could get out of the small white box. The same problems plagued the Nintendo Switch, at least at first. Developer Panic Button proved that with some effort, major PC titles could be ported to the Switch with phenomenal results. They were responsible for porting *Rocket League*, *Warframe*, *DOOM* and *Wolfenstein* among others. The success of those Panic Button developed games, coupled with the ever growing install base of the Switch, created a more welcoming environment for those previously sceptical large publishers.

The Nintendo Switch isn’t the best place to play these types of games by any means. I would still opt to play *DOOM* on an Xbox Series X or a PC if I could. These graphically intensive games usually run at a sub-720p resolution, sometimes reaching as low as a muddy 540p during intense gameplay. Textures are usually worse and frame rates usually suffer under the weak hardware. In some extreme cases, input lag or visual slow down has me reaching for any other console. But the fact that the game is even playable at all in a portable form factor is worth the price of admission. Just having the option of being able to play these types of games at home on your TV, or portably on your commute, is a convenience most consumers hadn’t experienced before.

The Nintendo Switch quickly became the most convenient way to play games because of its flexibility. If a game is available on Switch, I will opt to get it on Switch just so that I have the option of playing it portably if I want to, even though I play my Nintendo Switch in docked mode 99% of the time. Having the option to detach the controllers and pass one off to a friend makes the Nintendo Switch more than just a handheld console, but a portable multiplayer station too. It’s comfortable to hold for players with large or small hands, but it leans towards the small side. The all-important screen is respectable, but the equally-important battery life was initially lacking, unfortunately. On paper the battery life was spec’d to last just 2.5 hours when playing a CPU intensive game like *Breath of the Wild*, but could last up to 6.5 hours if playing much less graphically intensive games. Nintendo shadow-dropped a revision of the Switch to boost that battery power up to 4.5 hours for an intensive game and 9 hours for less intensive playing, which was greatly appreciated.

Nintendo also released the Switch Lite in 2019, a cheaper, portable-only option that lowered Nintendo’s barrier to entry. The Switch Lite’s size was much more convenient to carry around, and its form factor was way more comfortable than its bigger brother. The decision to change the left directional buttons into a traditional D-pad felt like a design choice made specifically to cater to us retro enthusiasts. At the time of launch, I fell in love with the Switch Lite and assumed it would be my go to Switch for portable play. However, Nintendo’s horrible account system made it a nightmare to transfer games and their saves back and forth between consoles.



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Even just playing a game you purchased digitally on your secondary Switch console requires you to connect to the internet, which as you could imagine would be a major problem for a portable device.

The last Nintendo Switch iteration to come out, at the time of writing at least, was the Nintendo Switch OLED Model. This is essentially just the regular Switch that we know and love, but with a larger, much more beautiful screen. When comparing the two, the difference is staggering. Not only is it brighter, but the colours pop way more. It's a change I never thought I would need, but now I never want to go back. The increased \$350 price point of the new model was a bit of a shock to Nintendo fans, making it a difficult decision to upgrade to. But if you'd somehow managed to avoid Switch ownership up until this point, that extra \$50 was worth the additional screen real estate.

Through all of these iterations, Nintendo never seemed to fix their Joy-Con thumbsticks, which are prone to failure. A concerning number of users have experienced 'Joy-Con Drift', where the thumbstick will seemingly drift towards one direction entirely on its own. If you happen to be plagued by the drift, the only permanent fix is to send your Joy-Con back to Nintendo for repair, which they luckily do for free in almost all cases. However, I'm not sure this can be considered a 'permanent' fix since the issue is so widespread that your Joy-Con will have an extremely high chance of succumbing to the drift once again. It makes me wish they could have iterated a bit more with these console

revisions to rid us power users of the drift once and for all.

Nintendo has done a decent job of releasing their retro catalogue on previous consoles, but they've been heavily criticised for their retro library on the Switch. It took them years to finally release a substantial bundle of NES, SNES and N64 games in the form of a subscription service. On one hand, this service brings some fantastic retro games to an audience that might otherwise have never had a chance to play them. On the other hand, some retro game enthusiasts would much rather have the option to purchase just the games they want directly, to own indefinitely. The ever-growing library of the Switch has gotten to a point where most of the Nintendo games that I would want to play have found a home on the Switch either in the form of a Nintendo Switch Online subscription or a 'retro collection' from the publishers themselves (*Mega Man Legacy Collection*, *Sega Genesis Classics*, etc.).

The Nintendo Switch has surpassed the Wii in lifetime sales, making it Nintendo's best selling home console at the time of writing, though its handheld-only Nintendo DS system is still way ahead as the company's best selling system ever. I have loved my time with my Nintendo Switch. It's by far my favourite console of all time. It's the most convenient console I own. It's the home to a lot of my favourite games. It changed the way that I think about playing games. It quite literally changed my life and gave me a career.

But I'm ready for what's next.



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Nintendo Wii U [8GB Basic White Console]
2012

184

Nintendo Switch Lite — Various
2019-2021



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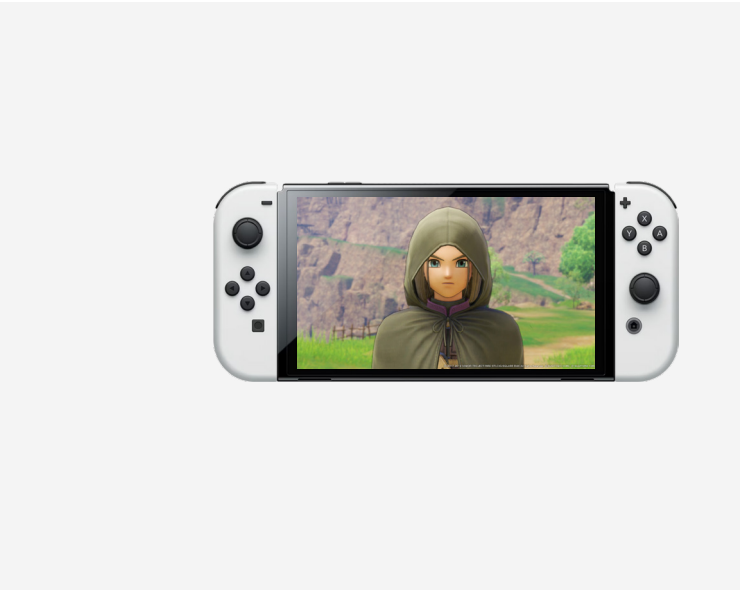
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192

185
Nintendo Switch — Neon Blue & Neon Red
2017

187
Nintendo Switch — OLED Model White
2021

186
Nintendo Switch — Mario Red & Blue Edition
2021

188
Nintendo Switch — OLED Model Splatoon 3 Special Edition
2022

189
Nintendo Switch — Animal Crossing Edition [Reverse]
2020

191
Switch Lite — Zacian & Zamazenta Edition
2019

190
Nintendo Switch — Super Smash Bros. Ultimate Edition
2020

192
Nintendo Switch Lite — Dialga & Palkia Edition [Reverse]
2021

JOY-CON VARIATIONS

Nintendo has never shied away from releasing variations of its controllers, with the Wiimote having a fair few variations. The Switch is the first mainstream handheld console with detachable controllers, so it only makes sense that Nintendo went to town with different Joy-Con designs!



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200



201

193
Gray
2017

196
Neon Yellow
2017

199
Red
2019

194
Neon Blue
2017

197
Neon Green
L—2017, R—2019

200
Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
2018

195
Neon Red
2017

198
Neon Pink
L—2018, R—2017

201
Eevee and Pikachu
2018



202



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204



205



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207



208



209



210

202
Blue / Neon Yellow
2019

205
Fortnite Wildcat Yellow / Blue
2020

208
Fortnite Fleet Force Blue / Yellow
2021

203
Neon Purple / Neon Orange
2019

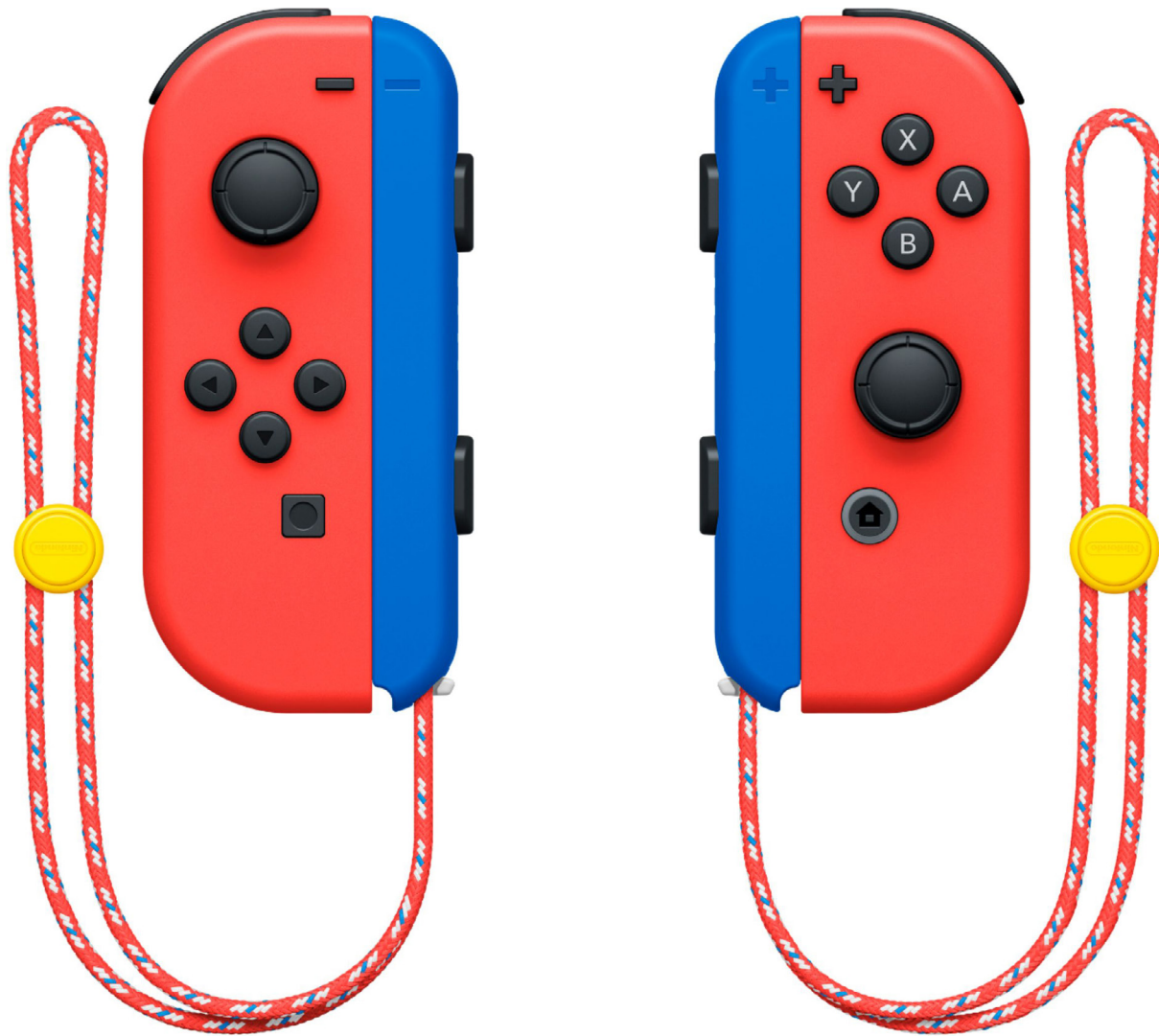
206
Dragon Quest XI S Edition
2021

209
Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD
2021

204
Animal Crossing: New Horizons
2020

207
Monster Hunter Rise
2021

210
OLED Model White
2021



211

211
Nintendo Switch Joy-Con — Mario Red and Blue Edition
2021



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212
HORI D-Pad Controller
2018



EDUCATING SWITCH.

John Steinbeck. Robert Frost. William Shakespeare. George Orwell. H.G. Wells.

In what many deem to be an ever-changing, progressive, and forward-thinking world that we live in, there remains one constant: everyone reading this will have studied at least one of the writers listed above during their school years. Deemed both influential and informative, the works of these authors have been read by thousands around the world year upon year. They take pride of place in academic calendars and end-of-year examinations, and ensure consistent learning experiences for all children, irrespective of location or context.

Macbeth. Of Mice and Men. War of the Worlds. Animal Farm.

These are just some of the many classic tales that have been analysed, scrutinised, lavished, and lauded by teachers and students, all in the name of becoming well-rounded intellectuals who understand the significance of these much-revered stories in their relevant time and place.

Now, depending on who you ask, these texts are either the cornerstone of education and cannot be replaced, or are representative of a systemic problem within the education system. Tried and tested, or tired and uninteresting? There are arguments for both. What cannot be disputed, however, is the rapid advancements in every sector of human life, both public and private. These developments have a direct impact on how we view the past, present, and future and, as such, we can no longer ignore the need to adapt and grow — even if it does mean breaking from tradition or rewriting the rules that felt previously set in stone.

Celebrating history and heritage is often one of the many motivators for the content studied in schools, and a prerequisite for being studied is how old something is. It is here that we begin, because it is the first of many reasons why I believe video games should be considered an integral part of the history and heritage we ask our children to study.

Hideo Kojima. Shigeru Miyamoto. Gunpei Yokoi. Chris Sutherland.

With upwards of 30 years' experience in the video game industry, these creators have achieved as much for the gaming industry as the authors have for literature. Their journey, and their work, are just as deserving of study and celebration, not least because of the talent on display. Understanding the complexities and nuances of coding principles, exploring the themes and conventions told through the narratives written, and appreciating the artistry of each game's design have all the hallmarks of essential learning in this modern age.

Whilst advancements in technology and teaching strategies are frequent, there is a persistent imbalance between schools and the resources they share. For all the benefits of video game study, there have been too many impracticalities and improbabilities for it to be reserved for anything other than only a very select few.

Until now.

The Nintendo Switch, with its hybrid nature and portable prowess, has changed the landscape of video gaming since its release in 2017. By offering the opportunity

Cardboard And Dreams

Nintendo Labo was a series of Toy-Con kits made out of cardboard which would create new ways of playing games when attached to Joy-Con or the Switch screen. Aimed mostly at children, most kits came bundled with software to make use of their unique capabilities, like the Robot Kit and the Vehicle Kit. Some were compatible with existing games, like the Motorbike Toy-Con which works with Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and the VR Kit that could be used with The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

to use it as both a home console and a portable handheld, it has reached new audiences and offered new gaming experiences for millions of players. It has been praised in ways that other consoles haven't been before, and it signifies a shift in how we will view and consume video games in the future. Its impact outside of the gaming industry is much, much bigger though.

A modest price point, coupled with a mighty fine form factor, has unlocked the potential for the Nintendo Switch to drastically alter the educational experiences of children in schools. No more can we quote budget constraints. No longer can we blame practicalities. We can't even claim a lack of awareness. In short, there is absolutely no reason why bringing Nintendo Switch consoles into schools shouldn't be a global priority. It is archaic to ignore the potential for consoles in the classroom. It is inexcusable to promote books and not games. It is detrimental to our future to model a disregard for something so integral to the lives of many.

Video games used to be deemed a hobby or a career for the 'most fortunate'. It used to be something that children did in their spare time; the activity that some parents didn't understand. It was, and still is, apportioned blame for the despicable actions of the very few who may have, once upon a time, played a video game or two. As we continue to educate ourselves and learn more about that which we don't always understand, there is an emerging need for everyone to acknowledge the positive impact that video games have on our lives. This begins with educators.

Educators have a responsibility to create engaging and meaningful content for their students. They have a responsibility to show an interest in what their students value most. The ultimate responsibility of an educator is to prepare their children for a world that hasn't been fully realised yet. None of this is possible without developing an awareness and understanding of content consumption — something which is playing an increasing role in children's development. You only need to look at playing time statistics to see just how much time young people spend playing games each week, and these numbers prove difficult to ignore.

"Study without desire spoils the memory, and it retains nothing that it takes in." Leonardo Da Vinci shared these wise words many years ago and, despite the passing of time, they can still be applied here. Engagement is essential to any learning, and the number of distractions that are competing for the children's attention continues to rise. Merging education with engagement through shared interests is where the Nintendo Switch shines and is exactly why its value in education is priceless.

Picture the scene. It's 9am and the first lesson of the day is about to begin. English. The students sit patiently waiting for the teacher to reach for the book and

begin reading the opening pages. Instead, the Switch is dropped into the dock and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is emblazoned across the screen. Rather than 15 minutes passively listening to someone read from a text, a controller is handed to a student, and they begin to navigate the virtual world — all the while, the children around them are engaging in conversation about what options are available to them and where they should go next. Come the end of the lesson, the children have plans to write a setting description, a newspaper report about the events that took place, a story inspired by the lore within, or an instructional guide on how to get started with the game. There are an extensive array of writing opportunities that can be crafted from this one gaming experience, and they mirror that of a good book.

There are a multitude of reasons why scenarios like this are possible with the Nintendo Switch, the most obvious being its portability. Hardly much bigger than a book, the Switch fits comfortably into any teacher's bag and can be transported with ease. The dock itself takes up little space too and can be left at school hooked up to the digital display for whenever it is needed. Another perk of the Switch — one that many won't share the same sentiment about — is the eShop. For all its faults, it is a simplistic storefront that is easy to navigate. This is excellent for those educators who aren't avid gamers, but who still want to explore the options available for their lessons. And there are options aplenty.

Our beloved Switch has become a flagpole for indie titles, and these offer all manner of different experiences. The indie scene encourages games that depict all walks of life, meaning there is no end to the possibilities that present themselves. By utilising short and sweet, pick-up-and-play games, educators can integrate them into the learning experiences they design with relative ease. These games are often inexpensive too. The focal point of the games selected won't always be those that are the biggest, best, and most complex — it is likely that the simpler experiences will be more accessible to all children, and this is an important consideration to be made.

This supports another way in which the Nintendo Switch has positioned itself as the perfect fit. From its UI to its Joy-Con, it has been designed with children in mind. Switch consoles are both robust and intuitive, and this ensures there isn't much required to start using them in the classroom. Hardware and software practicalities make it a tailor-made teaching tool that someone with no prior experience of video games would be able to make use of — albeit with a bit of help.

That help could quite easily be from the students themselves. In another exciting twist in the education tale, the students have more experience and know-how with technology than some teachers. After all, these students have grown up with technology and witnessed its evolution first-hand. They are experts, and there is



Nintendo 3DS Guide Louvre

This unique cartridge is only sold in the world-famous Louvre Museum in Paris. Rentable 3DS units contain this interactive guide to their exhibits, with a physical cart being purchasable in the gift shop. A digital version was also made available on the eShop.

a growing need to create opportunities for the children whereby they facilitate and lead their own learning. This can be comfortably achieved with game-based learning on the Nintendo Switch.

These sentiments are ones I share with teachers around the world, as the introduction and subsequent impact of the Nintendo Switch within education is clear to see. There are a multitude of companies that specialise in developing Switch-specific content for schools, just as there are teachers embarking on their own personal journeys to develop their practice.

Nintendo has been directly involved in shaping the game-based learning landscape, showcasing the true potential of the Switch and the impact it can have on education. Predominantly centred around engagement within the US, Nintendo partnered with the Institute of Play to provide Labo kits and Switch consoles to elementary schools. Digital Schoolhouse is another organisation that has focused efforts on using the Nintendo Switch in schools — this time creating content for the delivery of the Computing curriculum in the UK. Having worked with over 100,000 students in over 10,000 schools across all manner of projects, Digital Schoolhouse's impact on the education sector is clear to see. Also partnered with Nintendo, the goal is to use 'play-based learning to engage the next generation of pupils and teachers.'

Conceptually, video games featured within education aren't anything revolutionary. Educators have been utilising the benefits of games for years, namely under an umbrella term: gamification. This is commonly showcased through the inclusion of game tropes in non-gaming scenarios and is often centred on motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are apparent in all games, be

they physical or virtual, and have been proven techniques to engage children in learning. Competitions between students, certificates for achievement, and stickers for good practice; they all hone in on the chemical processes in our brain which encourage us to continue working hard. Applying this logic through the art of video games provides instant gratification and maintains the same levels that are achieved by the students in their free time.

It isn't just individuals and organisations that are taking note, though. In 2020, Poland's Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, authorised the inclusion of *This War of Mine* on the official reading list for students. Its depiction of real-world conflict and the impact it has on those directly involved and indirectly affected was the reason behind the decision and marks the first time a video game has made it onto such a list. The game has been made available to the students for free and offers hope for a future where video games are viewed as equal to books and films within the education sector.

Personally, I think it is impossible not to view them this way. The monumental shift in content consumption and creation must be accounted for. Whilst educators continue to promote a love of reading, there is no denying the importance children place on video games. Technology has shifted at a rapid rate and continues to do so in ways no one could have predicted. What the future holds for video games, and education, remains to be seen. What is certain though, is that the Nintendo Switch currently represents the quintessential way to integrate one of the most popular forms of entertainment into everyday learning in schools. We owe it to the children to do so.

We also owe it to ourselves. After all, we are meant to be life-long learners.



CASCADE OF COLOUR.

I spent many of my high school years in the art studio. I would go there and paint for hours that spilled beyond class-blocks into free periods, lunches, and pockets of time after the final class bell. It was my escape from everything — my anxiety, my insecurity, and my incredibly toxic friends who syphoned my energy as best as they could. The canvas was a way out. With watercolour, I rendered peculiar scenes of vibrant, comical animals. Bold, black felt pen lines caressed sloppy, saturated reds, yellows, and blues. These hues buried my baggage with each subsequent layer, but they nonetheless became encumbered with its heft.

There was an element of darkness to all of my work. Technicolour elephants with dead eyes marched endlessly around a figure-of-eight into infinity. Alligators sat in geometric files, slack-jawed and surrounded by a void of India ink. I wasn't happy. Colour remained my way out, a visual reminder that light could mingle with the space that I looked into each morning. But, nonetheless, that colour was saddled with the weight of my world.

On my Nintendo Switch's screen though, vibrancy struck me unencumbered. And, it struck from day one in a manner more acute than that of either my DS or 3DS screens prior. Less than twelve hours after my Switch arrived in the post, I left to visit my grandparents who were a car-to-bus-to-plane ride away. If one activity made me more anxious than attending school, it was travelling. But this time was different, as that March 2017 transit was an opportunity to immerse myself in *Breath of the Wild*'s Hyrule.

It's a magical place, a reinvention of *Zelda*'s landscapes which rolled and descended with a level of natural beauty that Nintendo had never before evoked. I would take moments to simply appreciate the grass. To appreciate the flowers. To marvel at the rolling plains which ceded to the mountains that descend to Lurelin Village along the coastline. The soft pastels layered over these moments of supreme beauty evoke a level of serenity that, in a moment, slows my rapidly-tapping leg whenever I remember Link looking across Tarrey Town's cubic buildings and their eclectic roofs.

My love of Nintendo's games ultimately lies on a mechanical level, but my eye is always taken first on an aesthetic one. *Breath of the Wild* succeeds in its truly open structure complemented by its deeply nuanced physics engine. But, that appreciation is channelled through art direction which is undeniably some of the industry's best. This has always been the case — Nintendo's worlds have always stood out amongst their peers. However, *Breath of the Wild* signalled a first step toward a reclamation of artistic invention that was lost for a spell, but has since spanned the lion's share of Switch-era titles from the company.

See, we didn't have art direction on Nintendo's contemporary level during the Wii U generation. There were doubtless hits as that console abruptly wound down, but the system was saddled with many titles which lost the visual texture of what came before. *Super Mario 3D World* is a critical example. It's a fantastic 3D platformer which carries the player through its stages on a carousel of continually new ideas. Nonetheless, it's also papered over by an aesthetic of blockiness which feels in large part artificial — lacking the life of locales like Delfino Island. Most damagingly though, it was also full of staid motifs established by *New Super Mario Bros.* nearly a decade prior.

Nintendo found itself settling into an artistic rut that turned out a volume of titles that felt overly similar or unambitious visually. I loved the games which nailed this facet of their construction — *Pikmin 3*, *Nintendo Land*, *Splatoon* — but a plurality of Wii U titles felt so safe. They failed to evoke the same visual spark which defined large swaths of the GameCube and Wii libraries. Whether facing down issues with HD development or a charge to emulate the aesthetics of more popular Nintendo machines, the Wii U existed in a creative shadow.

Evolution Of Colour

The original Game Boy featured four shades of green, while the Pocket and Light moved on to four (not fifty) shades of grey — 2-bit. The Game Boy Advance upped the ante to 5-bit colour, capable of 512 colours in 'character' mode. The DS increased this massively with its 18-bit colour depth (262,144 colours), and the 3DS was capable of displaying around 16.77 million colours. And the Switch? While solid numbers are hard to come by as screens aren't often detailed in this way anymore, a good estimate would be around 1 billion.

Those clouds began to break as we segued towards Switch. In a world where 2016 held a better slate of titles, 2015's *Splatoon* would've seemed like the true turning point and antidote to the artificial, formulaic worlds that we'd been stepping into across the generation. Alas, it was instead simply a counterpoint to the rest of its console's library in large part, followed up by some of Nintendo's flattest titles, like *Mario Tennis: Ultra Smash* and *Animal Crossing: amiibo Festival*. Nonetheless, *Splatoon* was an early telegraph of a return to conceptually larger games which executed on visual identities that risked a bit more in pursuit of its audience's imagination.

Splatoon's world is among my favourites ever conceptualised by Nintendo. When I consider the notion of 'Nintendo magic', if such a thing truly exists, I look to *Splatoon* for its justification. It's just so visually inspired. We'd never seen an undersea theme brought to the shore-line in this way, imbued with a Nickelodeon punk feel, and punched up with a seamless coat of ink scattered across its environments. Painting the town pink or purple or cyan or orange — colours obfuscated by an opposing team doing the same — transfixed me acutely. It motivated my inner painter. *Splatoon*'s splashes of colour and personality become a tsunami of creative inspiration. I was so hopelessly caught in its undertow and so desperately prepared for more Nintendo titles to do the same; to bring original art direction in conversation with gameplay intent.

While it took until *Breath of the Wild* to feel that way again, the intervals in between examples of awe-inspiring art direction have since diminished and continue to shrink. Sequentially, I think of *ARMS* right after *Zelda*. For all its mechanical shortcomings, *ARMS* cemented Switch-era Nintendo's commitment to artistic boldness once more. It was a game whose world felt, at first blush, so foreign and strange, which was to its ultimate benefit.

At its best, Nintendo's art direction subverts your expectations. *Breath of the Wild* subverted the curated, high fantasy locales of *Skyward Sword* with something lower, something you've hiked through. *ARMS*, with a more traditional Nintendo style, built a world around weird guys with stretchy arms who smack each other with odd stuff. Maybe you're playing as a gentleman made out of jelly who hits people with boxing gloves. Or, perhaps you're a robotic police officer with an AI dog friend, and you poke at the opponent with confetti poppers.

None of this makes sense, and it looks so different from anything else that Nintendo has made. But that makes it wonderful. There is no house style outside of *Smash Bros.* per se, but there is a feeling that when I boot up a Nintendo game that I've stepped into an eclectic place. That I've entered into a digital world that just wants to make me smile and forget my anxieties by allowing me to escape into a world which feels comfortable being peculiar. That revels in a sense of variety across disparate titles. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* looks nothing

like *ARMS*, but both games ask me to accept the weird aesthetic rules of their world. Goofiness, whimsy — so many distinct yet parallel words can describe the almost indescribable feeling of enjoying Nintendo's art direction.

There's just a spirited lightheartedness to seeing Nintendo's timelessly designed characters explore motifs that become gateways into new experiences. *ARMS* embodies this philosophy, but it's far from the only example — even just in 2017 — of Nintendo achieving inviting, original art direction success. Perhaps the most towering instance is *Super Mario Odyssey*. After an era categorised by the *New Super Mario Bros.* malaise of motifs, *Odyssey* was a brilliant return to form. On a systemic level, it was a revival and expansion of the explorative format that titles like *Super Mario 64* and *Sunshine* pioneered.

But, the game's true success was in its reaffirmation that Mario's world can still be weird. The game opens with Bowser in a tuxedo and segues into something out of a Tim Burton film, a black-and-white land full of hat-wearing ghosts. Shortly after, you become a hyperreal T-Rex, and minutes later you're traversing sand dunes to discover a vibrant skeleton town nestled amongst them. The first hour has such a strong feeling of invention, one which basks in its ability to situate Mario everywhere but the Mushroom Kingdom. The very notion of an odyssey, a grand adventure, illustrates the ethos that motivates Nintendo's art design.

I remember waking up at 4:30 am to play *Super Mario Odyssey* before school, snapping awake and being sucked into a new tenor of Mario platformer. It was so invigorating. I did not see many touchstones to anchor me to my previous understanding of what Mario was. I was rapidly introduced to faces and places which asked me to reconsider what Mario's universe is. The residents of Bonneton and Tostarena reignited the franchise's mystique, the rich architecture of their environments begging for me to peer around each corner to discover something new.

Buried in Nintendo's subversive art direction is a provocation of curiosity. It connects the synapses in my brain that want to explore, that want to be shown something creative and silly. There's a genuine power in that. There's a power to surprising me aesthetically with a glossy food-themed paradise complete with sentient forks. It makes IP older than myself feel fresh again. It reconnects me with my earliest Mario experiences playing *Super Mario Galaxy*, a game that evoked similar awe through the construction of spaces that weren't afraid to play with concepts that don't make sense. But, if you put your faith in their internal logic, these spaces don't have to.

Nintendo's art direction tells us to never grow up, it asks us to step into lands of make-believe. In my darkest high school moments, I could always turn to Mario or Donkey Kong or Judd Jr., dissolve into the Lost Kingdom, Fruity Factory, or Inkopolis and find a world whose entire

mission was to make me smile.

This momentum has been sustained across the years the Switch has been on the market, with *Kirby and the Forgotten Land* being a more recent example. Scouring the palimpsest cities of Forgo breathed fresh life into a franchise that returned to the same tired *Dream Land* motifs again and again. Sure, *Forgotten Land* may be remembered primarily as a much-needed mechanical innovation — which it is — but I'll remember it as the Kirby game that dropped me into a world designed to subvert the locales and connotations of the series' previous art design. With Nintendo's hybrid handheld, we're riding a perpetually motivating high of thoughtful, provocative examples of art direction that make otherwise fatigued IP feel fresh.

It's a point to underline, as these fatigued IPs are released onto further fatigued hardware. There is no competition between *Breath of the Wild*'s fidelity and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*'s — a gap that's even wider with respect to *Breath of the Wild*'s sequel and *Forbidden West*. It's not even a conversation worth having; there is no technical comparison here. However, Nintendo makes the point almost moot through style and design. The company continually proves that horsepower is not a prerequisite for immersing the player. If it was, the low-framerate enemies of *Forgotten Land* would nix my connection to Forgo. Yet, we don't foreground this issue because we're all too fixated on how striking its art direction is, focusing instead on the dilapidated intersection of urban structure and naturalised regrowth.

We become lost in these games' use of colour. There is no sadness or compromise or weight behind the brilliant red of Mario's cap in the way that there was behind my high school brushstroke. Nintendo's use of colour is exactly what I want mine to become: an expression of sheer joy. The glint of fuschia upon an Octoling's Inkbrush.

Organic? Fantastic!

Handheld gaming is no stranger to OLED (Organic Light-Emitting Diode) screens, with the original PlayStation Vita model sporting one. Given its name due to the organic compound used that emits light when a current is run through it, this screen technology is thinner and lighter than traditional LED screens, requires no backlighting, and is capable of producing accurate, vibrant colours.

The shimmering blue that stretches across Forgo Bay. The warm coral hue of Isabelle's shirt. The metallic reflection of Samus' armour. The bold yellow of DK's banana horde.

These moments of colour coalesce in a library of games that stand as a monumental reflection of unmitigated creativity. It's impossible to dwell on frame drops or texture density when your Switch is inches from your face, inviting you to let everything around the screen's edges fade away. We forgive Nintendo's technical shortcomings because we cannot forget the feeling of weightless imagination elicited by a singular peek of the Great Plateau.

Even the hardware acknowledges the power in Nintendo's art direction. The Switch OLED's entire ethos centres on offering a richer lens into these worlds and characters which perpetually reinvent franchises that have grown up alongside us. Cascades of colour from *Animal Crossing* to *Metroid Dread* run the tonal gamut and wash over the library, bathing it in a patina of renewal that hasn't been felt in quite some time. Yes, that feeling is owed in large part to inventive gameplay ideas and smart business decisions. But, we can never lose sight of how important the aesthetic constructions of these worlds are.

When I look behind the coats of paint that cover my many watercolours from high school, I see a tumult of irreconcilable tensions that threatened to subsume me. When I look behind the colours that the best games of the Switch's library are soaked in, I just find happiness. I find pure happiness. My favourite Nintendo games provide that. They provide me with continually new motifs that move me out of the tightness in my chest or the weight behind my eyes. I can just look at a screenshot from *Splatoon 2*, smile, and feel a bit lighter. If only for a moment. But, Nintendo first-party studios and second-party partners are finding these moments so often in the Switch era. The system's library has benefited greatly from this consistently top-tier art direction, and I've benefited greatly too.





GAMING IN THE GAPS.

words Jamie Fox

What the hell did I used to do with my time?

It's a question I've asked myself often since becoming a parent. You take for granted that you'll always have boundless free time to indulge in your hobbies...until you don't. My daughter is the best thing to have happened in my life. She amazes me every day and watching her grow into her own little person is incredible. But of course she needs me to look after her and guide her. When she was first born it was nappy changes, night-time soothing, baths, more soothing, putting her down for naps, more nappies — your whole pre-baby routine is out the window. As a lifelong video game fan, that's quite the shift in focus. Before parenthood I'd spend long evenings and weekends gaming, diving into huge RPGs and ploughing through battle passes, levels, quests; you name it. But, rightly, that was parked after our daughter arrived. Twelve hour gaming sessions are now a thing of the past.

I'm speaking about myself here of course. There will be people out there with the free time to indulge in their favourite games to that extent or perhaps gaming is their career. But for me, a happily married working dad, I just don't have the hours. If you are all of those things and still game for tens of hours a week, I salute you!

I'm always a dad now, which is immensely rewarding. In addition to that, five days out of seven, I work as a Communications Manager at a FTSE100 company. Truth be told, it's not a job I chatted about with my high school careers adviser. Back then I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up (when does that happen by the way?). Some friends were going off to university to pursue their vocations; others joined the military. Out of pure convenience, and unbridled laziness, I snagged a job at the call centre just next to my parent's house. The salary seemed like a lot of money then and funded my weekend nights out and, importantly, bought me the latest consoles and games. Fast forward nearly two decades and I'm now in a senior(ish) position at the company.

Staying where I was, trying to suss out my life, also led me to meet my wife. She got a job in the office and I'd like to say we hit it off instantly, but she actually thought I was a total grump at first. I was her boss briefly before she got a job in the health care sector. But before she left, I'd managed to convince her that I actually wasn't a grumpy so-and-so at all, and that I was at the very least sort-of-allright. We now have a 4-year-old daughter who is incredibly cool and funny and who surprises us with new things she's learned all the time.

But a career, married life, and parenthood don't leave a massive amount of time to sink into your passions. And there were points, particularly in the early parenting days, when I thought gaming was something to be done occasionally as a nostalgic reminder of my younger years.

Then Spider-Man came to my house...

My daughter was munching on the last of her dinner while I washed up the dishes. There was a knock at the door, which was odd for that time of night, and doubly odd as this was during the first lockdown and unscheduled visits were really uncommon. I wondered if some kid had kicked their ball into the garden and they wanted it back. With a huff I dried my hands and opened the front door. Stood half way down the front garden was Spider-Man. Well, not the Peter Parker, I don't live in the *Multiverse of Madness*, but it was someone dressed as Spider-Man. This wasn't your Halloween-level costume either — this was a proper cosplay number and the person wearing it clearly had the physique to pull it off. Seeing my somewhat bemused expression, Spider-Man held out a package in both hands. It took a moment to realise what it was. This real-life hero was holding up a boxed *Mario*-themed Nintendo Switch, the blue and red one, which coincidentally matched his outfit. Turns out my wife had won a competition run by a local fundraiser, the Duloch Spider-Man (look him up, he's been on *The One Show* — a magazine-style television programme here in the UK), and he makes a point of coming to the winner's house in full costume to deliver the prize. She'd entered thinking it would be something I'd really like to win. And she was not wrong! My daughter, who had been watching from the dinner table, thought the whole thing was amazing and still tells people that "Spider-Man is daddy's friend". I got mega cool points that day, as well as a socially distanced selfie with Spidey.

The Amazing Spider-Man

Did you know that Rare developed a handheld Spider-Man game for Game Boy? Released in 1990, this side-scrolling platformer action title saw Spidey's identity revealed to his biggest foes (who served as end-stage boss encounters), and a quest to find his kidnapped wife, Mary Jane.

art Raul Higuera

Of course I was delighted, especially as this was during the pandemic and Nintendo’s handhelds were highly sought after and hard to come by. I had no idea at that point how transformational the system would be for my gaming life.

Pre-superhero visit, I’d maybe try to squeeze in a round or two of *Apex Legends*, *Call of Duty*, or *Fortnite* once I’d finished work and the baby was down to sleep. I’d already given up on lengthy titles because I was constantly tired and just couldn’t concentrate on a tricky plot or get invested in characters. Something quick and easy, that relied more on muscle memory than a branching storyline suited me just fine. But invariably the little one would wake up and need me at a crucial point. She always comes first and a quick “sorry lads, got to go” to my team on voice chat was pretty common. To their credit, my friends were very understanding and tried protecting my stationary avatar for as long as they could in the hope that I’d be back quickly. Many times I wasn’t.

But once I received the Switch, new opportunities to mould gaming into my existing routine opened up. All of a sudden I could play whenever and wherever time presented itself. That may sound obvious when talking about handheld gaming systems; I do play almost exclusively undocked. But as someone who firmly associated gaming with a television or monitor, and who hadn’t played a handheld console since the Game Boy Color, the change was profound.

The little gaps in the day; be it the post-breakfast lull before the nursery run, lunch breaks, the little hour or so I wasn’t doing the bedtime routine and putting our daughter down, even (and I apologise for this in advance) when I was on the loo; became prime gaming time. Having a cup of tea in the morning and trying to complete my gyroid collection on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was a complete joy. Got ten minutes before the first meeting of the day? That’s enough time to jump into a mission on *Star Fox*. My wife wants to watch the *Real Housewives* of Wherever on the living room telly? *Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity* it is then. And if daddy is needed, I can just suspend the system.

Much like Spider-Man who was bitten by a radioactive spider, a handheld gaming bug bit me after getting the Switch. During 2020 and 2021 I picked up a Nintendo DS Lite and a Nintendo 2DS. They were listed for good prices and I figured the DS Lite would be good for Game Boy Advance games at the very least. And the 3DS library, which is fully compatible with the 2DS, has some fantastic titles. Looking at the row of boxes on my shelf right now I can see *Final Fantasy IV*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Pokémon Omega Ruby* and *Pokémon Moon*, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds* and *Ocarina of Time 3D*, *Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask*, *Dragon Quest’s VI, VII* and *VIII*, *Yo-Kai Watch*, *Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam Bros.* and more. It’s a modest collection, but it’s been amassed pretty quickly and I’ve had great fun tracking down these games at the cheapest prices possible.

As our toddler became a preschooler, and therefore an even better sleeper, I could really get stuck into my favourite genre of yester-year: role-playing games. I mentioned not being in the right headspace for that type of experience before, but now I was ready to get lost in a deep narrative again. Thanks to helpful NPCs in most of the titles I listed

above, I can usually get up to speed with where I was in the story if I’ve not played them for a while. Special mention here for *Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes of an Elusive Age - Definitive Edition* (what a title that is by the way) for the story recap that comes up while your saved game is loading — absolutely brilliant and something I wish more developers did.

As Covid restrictions are removed and I need to travel again for work, flights and train journeys not only transport me to where I have to be, but also to fantastic places like Revachol (*Disco Elysium*), Ivalice (*Final Fantasy XII*), and Erdrea (*Dragon Quest XI*). Some people were a little disgruntled at having to come back into the office after having worked at home for so long, but I really enjoy the commute in and out of the city centre. It’s my time to play.

And I see others doing the same each morning and evening. Even if it’s just *Candy Crush* on a mobile phone or *Solitaire* on a tablet, other players surround me. It’s fantastic to see the prevalence and acceptance of a hobby that was once exclusively the realm of a limited demographic. It’s all made possible by handheld devices.

So why am I writing this and gushing about the benefits of handheld gaming systems? I suppose the point I’m trying to make is that if you’re a new parent and/or have a busy work life, I want to reassure you that you can still have incredible gaming experiences, as impossible as that may seem at times. A handheld system made that so much more achievable for me and it could do the same for you; unlocking time you never even knew you had. In true work-style, I’ve captured some key observations below:

You may need to take a break from gaming — if you’ve just had a baby or landed a challenging role, you may need to take time out from gaming. And that’s fine! When you do get into a new routine you’ll have lots of games that came out that you could pick up (possibly a bit cheaper).

A handheld system can help — you’ll get this by now, but the Switch gave me loads of opportunities to play that I didn’t have before.

Be selective with the games you do play — time is precious, can you really afford to relearn complex combat mechanics or have to flick through a strategy guide to remember where you were in a game? Anything that’s pick-up-and-play is good. And if you’re keen for a story, try to go with something that recaps things, or has a handy journal to track your progress.

Try to have some protected time each week — even if it’s just an hour where you tell yourself you’re not going to work at night, or you agree with your significant other that you’re off parenting duties. That protected time can really recharge the batteries, especially if gaming helps you de-stress and unwind.

I consider myself to be very lucky. I love my family and I’m able to spend time with them and still maintain my passion for gaming. This experience has given me such affection for handheld consoles in all their glorious forms. And you know what? I’ll always be grateful to Spider-Man for swinging by my house that night.



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Final Fantasy IV
[Nintendo DS]
2007

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The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time 3D
[Nintendo 3DS]
2011



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Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask
[Nintendo 3DS]
2012

216
Chrono Trigger
[Nintendo DS]
2009



Cool, Calm, Connected

The DMG-04, or the Game Link Cable, was the original link cable for the Game Boy line, allowing multiplayer shenanigans for compatible titles. Every console in the Game Boy line-up had a link cable (the Advance had a 4-way link cable too), but they were cast aside in favour of WiFi connection from the Nintendo DS onwards.

GATEWAY TO GAMING.

As a child, I was enamoured with the sheer conceptual nature of video games. Interactive media that I myself could control, changing how a set of pixels moved about and what they did. The biggest obstacle in my way, however, was money. I didn't grow up with a whole lot of security in terms of where I lived (by my teenage years I'd lived in a total of four different homes for various lengths of time), which meant that indulging in expensive luxuries such as video games was a pipe dream. It wasn't until I was exposed to a Game Boy that I realised that it was possible for me to actually get into the hobby at all.

The Game Boy is an incredible technological feat. I mean think about it in the context of the time — a handheld console that allowed you to play games like *Mario* on the go. A console that introduced the world to the cultural phenomenon of *Pokémon*. The Game Boy is the third best-selling video game console of all time (at the time of writing at least), and for good reason. On launch the console was £69.99, compared to the £189.99 that the Sega Mega Drive/Genesis retailed for, meaning that parents were drawn to the Game Boy above all else when choosing a present for their children.

My introduction to this system wasn't actually through playing it, but rather through seeing a child in the care of a family member playing *Pokémon* on one. I actually don't know from memory what *Pokémon* game it was, but a cursory internet search tells me that it must have been the original game, given how the dates coincided with each other. I remember wondering how on Earth something so small could possibly do something so incredible, and badgering family members for the chance to hold and play one in my own hands.

You see, until that point, I'd played consoles that my uncle owned. He's quite possibly the only member of my family other than me who knows what he's doing with technology, so it was rather fitting. Thanks to him I'd gotten to play a SNES, GameCube, N64, and an original PlayStation. I can still remember playing *Super Mario 64* and being absolutely horrified at the fact you could pull the nose of Mario on the title screen. For reasons only known to my child self, this terrified me to such a degree that I never did beat the game — I refused to even load it because it had such a creepy aura to me.

Then came my actual introduction to the handheld world: the Game Boy Color. The console was released at a retail price of £80 in 1998, which was actually two years before my birth, and around six years before I got one. Growing up in a family that had difficulty with money meant that, technologically speaking, we were always a few years behind everybody else. As the world fawned at the wonder of the Nintendo DS, I was desperately trying to see my Game Boy Color screen in the dark. Later I would get a Game Boy Advance, but my fondest memories of the Game Boy come from that original Game Boy Color.

In terms of games, the GBC really did have it all, something for everyone: *Harvest Moon*, *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe*, *Pokémon Crystal*, *Pokémon Gold and Silver*, *The Legend Of Zelda: Oracle of Ages/Oracle of Seasons*, *Metal Gear Solid...* The list goes on. My own Game Boy collection, for which my memory is admittedly rather vague, had copies of *Super Mario Land*, *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe*, *Pokémon Crystal*, the *Finding Nemo* tie-in game and, later, when I got a Game Boy Advance, *Sonic Advance*. My aunt used to have a drawer just filled with Game Boy games for some mysterious reason (she never played them, and to this day can barely work a five-year-old phone, so the fact that she used to know what she was doing when it came to technology is wild to me), and every single time I visited her I'd get given a new game to borrow, which is how I experienced classics like the previously mentioned *Pokémon* games. Years later, around 2008, I got a Nintendo DS and promptly retired my Game Boy as it had served its purpose. Those games, however, would stay around for years to come.



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The Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Seasons
[Game Boy Color]
2001

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The Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Ages
[Game Boy Color]
2001

219
Metal Gear: Ghost Babel
[Game Boy Color]
2000

personal friend. If I was ever travelling for longer than half an hour, that thing would be glued to my side. It was on this system that I experienced the wonders of *Pokémon* for the first time in full, playing *Pokémon Platinum*, actually beating my first *Pokémon* game, and realising how adorably cute most Pokémon actually were.

The Nintendo DS might have had multiple different iterations, but my heart will always belong to that original, bulky release. It was a wonder to be able to play brand new releases alongside older Game Boy games, and my god did the Nintendo DS have games. Not only did it have core *Pokémon* releases such as the aforementioned *Pokémon Platinum* and *Pokémon Diamond/Pearl*, but it had multiple different *Mario* titles, two core *Zelda* titles, around sixteen thousand licensed tie-in games [I may be exaggerating] and so much more. Personally though, I remember fixating on a couple of games for a long time, primarily *New Super Mario Bros.* and *Pokémon Ranger: Shadows Of Almia*.

New Super Mario Bros. appears from the outset to not be anything to write home about in the modern era, but it has to be understood that it was a return to 2D fourteen years after the moustachioed mascot had last been seen in it. It acted as a fun platformer, one that I played whenever I wanted a distraction from my other games. *Pokémon Ranger: Shadows Of Almia*, however, is a game that I must have put 60 hours into as a kid at a minimum.

While I adored *Pokémon* games, my main issue with them, even as a child, was that there was a distinct lack of a compelling story. I gravitated towards games that were primarily concerned with narrative, with gameplay being a close second, and core titles in the *Pokémon* series really preferred to be all about the gameplay. *Pokémon Ranger: Shadows Of Almia* did the exact opposite of that, with the core gameplay loop literally being about drawing circles around various Pokémon in order to bring them onto your team. If you're unaware of the story of the game, you start as a student in the Ranger School and graduate alongside your friend, joining a local group of Rangers in a quest to help as many people in need as possible. You then uncover a huge plot and over the course of the story, you end up investigating a volcano, breaking into a boat, commandeering said boat, crashing the boat into the school you graduated from, becoming part of a Ranger Union and then uncovering even MORE plots to destroy the Pokémon world.

As a child, I put so many hours into that first part of the game prior to joining the Ranger Union that I believed it was actually the only section of the game. I found the aforementioned part on the boat to be so incredibly tough that it took me multiple days before I finally bested it and basked in the glory of my victory. I sat back, sighed with relief that I'd finally beat the game and then watched as my character made his way towards the Ranger centre. The characters all congratulated me on saving the day, and I was proud of myself until roughly five minutes later, when it was revealed that not only was this not the end of the game, but this was actually around halfway through the game, and there was a whole lot more to come.

I don't recall whether I did beat *Pokémon Ranger: Shadows Of Almia* in the end. I do know that I pumped a lot more time into it after the reveal that this wasn't in fact the end of the game.

By the time it was finally time to put it into the deep box where old consoles go, my Nintendo DS had a hell of a lot of use out of it, with scratches and dings everywhere. I never upgraded to the Nintendo 3DS because by the time it was released I'd been gifted an Xbox 360 [not long before the release of the Xbox One], and I fell off the handheld scene for a long while. It wouldn't be until my first year at university in 2018, and the Nintendo Switch, that I would finally be drawn back in.

The Switch launched at £279.99, a far cry from the launch prices of older handheld systems. Indeed, it launched at only £70 less than the PS4, making it much harder to recommend it over Sony's system to families without the type of money to support a hobby like this. The first handheld system I ever bought with my own money [well, university loan, but who's counting?] was the Nintendo Switch, and I can even name the exact day that I bought the system — 7th December 2018, a date that is often remembered for the release of one particular game, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*. Weirdly though, I didn't buy my Switch because of *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*. Rather, I was watching a gameplay trailer for *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order* and it made me want a Switch incredibly badly. I remember walking to my local GAME the next day, having not slept, waiting in a queue with somebody else who had very clearly also not slept and was surviving purely on caffeine. Then the doors opened, and I was met with *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, sealing my fate and my purchase.

It wasn't until around six months later that I'd completely and utterly fall in love with my Switch. I'd enjoyed playing *Super Mario Odyssey* and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* in the months since my purchase, but it hadn't become my main console. That was all changed with *Super Mario Maker 2*. For those who aren't familiar with the spin-off from the core *Mario* titles, *Super Mario Maker* is a series that allows you to create your own *Mario* levels. There's a huge amount of creative options on display, allowing players to make levels of varying complexity. I dabbled in making my own courses, with some that should never have seen the light of day.

I never did buy *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order*. My ex-girlfriend did, a long time after I bought the Switch, so wildly the game that persuaded me to buy the system was a game that I just never bought or played myself. I use my Switch primarily as a system to play random small indie titles that I can't play elsewhere, not for big AAA releases these days. The Switch is no longer my main console, but I'll always cherish the time I spent with it and it's a fond part of my gaming collection.

Handheld systems are wonderful feats of engineering. Computers used to be massive, hulking behemoths that could barely be carried, yet we're now able to carry them around in our pockets, playing games on the go that we could previously only dream of being able to play. They allow a whole generation of gamers to be created, ones that can't afford to buy next-generation technology or huge set-ups. Without the original Game Boy, there's no way I'd even be a gamer. Without the Nintendo DS, I absolutely wouldn't have become a gaming journalist. Handheld systems are so important to the youth, to those less fortunate and to those who come from families struggling financially. Sure, the Switch is still expensive, but it's nowhere near as expensive as next-generation systems, and it provides just as much joy.

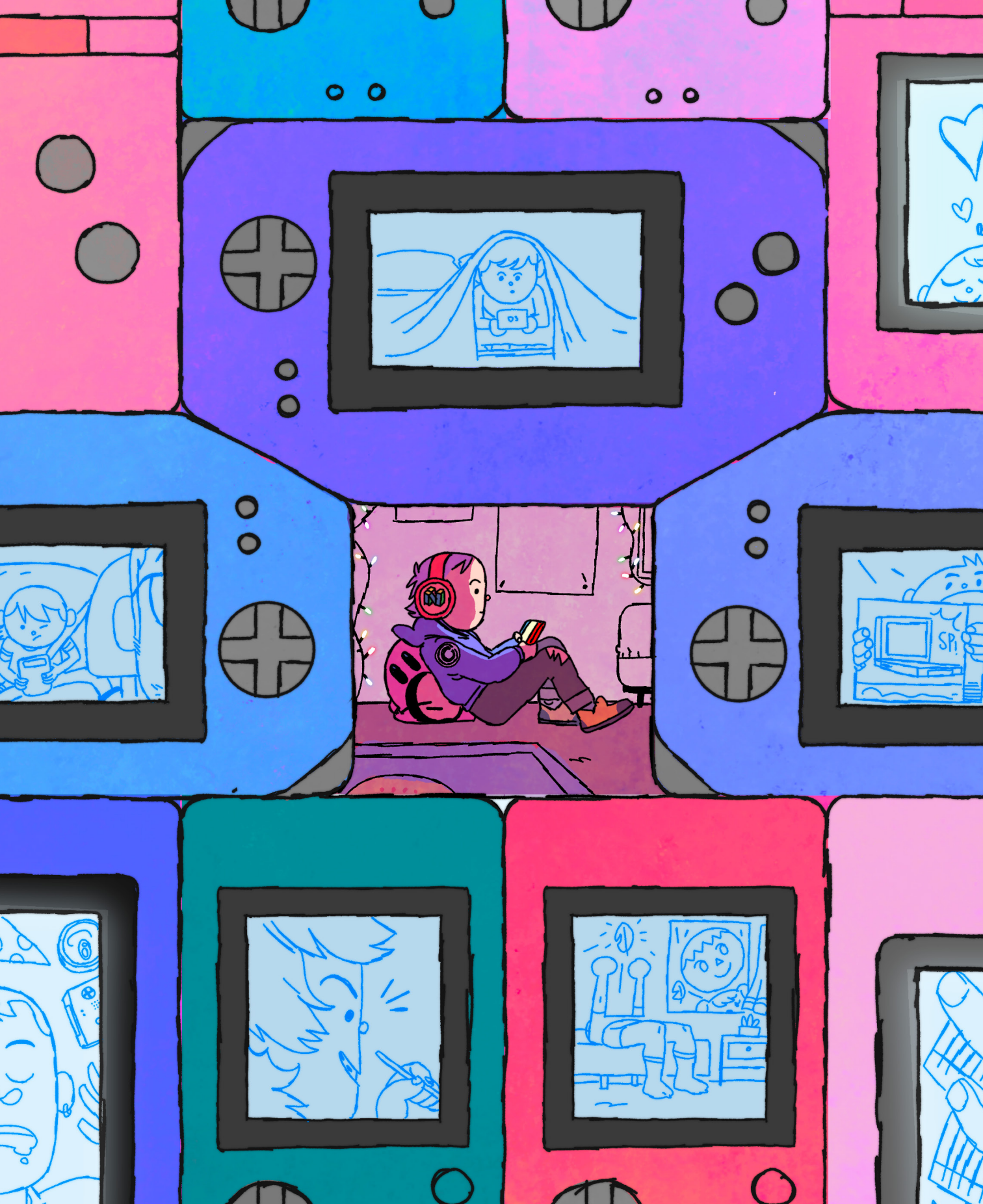


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Before we get to the Nintendo DS though, there's something else I want to talk about. There is an element to handheld consoles that people don't really talk about, and that deserves touching upon. That element is, of course, the McDonald's Happy Meal Handheld systems, and the brief time that they tried to get into the gaming world. Retailing at whatever the price of your Happy Meal was, McDonald's partnered with multiple different developers and publishers to release systems with simple versions of beloved series. In terms of affordability, this was a wonderful idea. For an incredibly small asking price, you could experience the joys of handheld gaming for yourself without breaking the bank. In fact, as a kid, I remember owning more games that came from McDonald's at one point than I did for my actual Game Boy.

Based upon my own memory alone, due to the distinct lack of information out there about the systems themselves, I remember there being *Crash Bandicoot* and *Sonic* LCD system games that all did one thing each. Sonic would skateboard in one of them, and in another, you could play football as Tails. It's such a weird niche in the history of handhelds that finding and capturing any authentic and accurate information is near-impossible, yet as a child, I owned multiple of these systems and played them for hours. It got to the stage where I wasn't so much excited to get a Happy Meal from McDonald's, but I was far more excited to see which LCD system I was getting with my meal, to find out what would be occupying me for the next six hours.

I got my Nintendo DS for Christmas one year if my memory serves me correctly. It was something I instantly fell in love with, and that turned into my primary gaming console for years to come. The Nintendo DS rapidly became my closest and most



GROWING UP WITH NINTENDO.

words Jess Elizabeth Reed

It's another hot evening in Las Vegas, Nevada. The year is 2003. I'm nine years old, propped up on my elbows under the covers, a soft glow emanating from the worm light plugged into my Game Boy Advance. In real time, it's probably past midnight. But on my screen, in *Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town*, it's 2:40 pm and I'm trying to get my pixelated farmer to Yodel Ranch before it closes up shop for the day.

My finger is pressed so hard against the R trigger that it's starting to cramp, and yet my farmer keeps up the same determined pace. If I don't make it on time, my cows will go without food for the evening, meaning that I'll be met by grumpy mooing in the morning instead of the usual fresh milk. With the Cow Festival only a few days away, it's not a situation I can afford.

The time ticks up from 2:45 to 2:46 to 2:47 and sweat is beginning to accumulate on my young brow. I'm internally scolding myself for allowing my fodder stores to deplete. I have more growing, but it will be a day or two in-game before any is ready. I still have to cross through Rose Square, and I'm positive I won't make it. I'm holding my breath in the already stuffy dome I've created under my *Scooby-Doo* sheets. Just when I'm sure the clock will shift to 3:00 pm and I'll be locked out of my hard-sought goal, I manage to reach the ranch and enter the building.

Time stops and I can breathe again.

In *Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town*, time only passes when you're outdoors. While you're inside any building, the needs of the rest of the world are a distant concern. It's an apt analogue to how I felt at ten years old playing my Game Boy in secret each night. It was a universe that existed separate from my real life.

As one of six kids, quiet moments were sacred. I used to consider myself both an early bird and a night owl, but the truth is that I just enjoyed being awake when no one else was — a habit I've carried into adulthood despite living with just one roommate. I honestly loved the hectic mess of day-to-day life with my family, but there was nothing quite like being entirely alone at night with my farm glowing up at me from my Game Boy screen. Even all these years later, I can't help but feel like handheld games in general are perfectly suited for times where you're suspended outside of the regular flow of life, for those in-between spaces where you aren't able to do much else except immerse yourself in another world.

Such in-between spaces have their own rules and rituals, and I built an entire lifestyle around the requisite routines. The main threat to my late-night farming habit was my mom coming in to check on me — at which point I would lay flat on top of my Game Boy and pretend to be asleep, allowing the worm light to wedge up between my little ribs. As a side note, the backlight era ushered in by the Nintendo DS did remove the worm light as an obstacle, but smothering your DS under your body is a very good way to accidentally snap the hinge of that particular handheld, making the top screen forever floppy (trust me).

There was also the all-too-dangerous possibility of falling asleep while playing and waking to find that Mineral Town had marched on without me, sometimes

A Harvest Moon Story

When is *Harvest Moon* not *Harvest Moon*? Well, as of 2012 the original developer of the series, Marvelous, decided to stop licensing their games to their North American publisher Natsume. In Japan, the titles were known as *Bokujō Monogatari*, but the English title was actually owned by Natsume. This forced Marvelous to change the games name outside of Japan to *Story Of Seasons*. The *Harvest Moon* brand lives on, however, as Natsume now develop their own games under this name. Confusing? Just a tad.

art Raul Higuera

for multiple in-game days, or to discover that the Game Boy had run out of batteries and turned off in the night, erasing all of my progress. The thing about most games at the time was that auto-save was a rare feature and you often had to reach a specific save point location in order to safely turn the game off. In that way, handheld gaming wasn't just an escape for me as a player but rather represented a world separate from my own. The game did not care what was going on in my world, that I was a kid up way too late and would predictably fall asleep in the middle of watering my plants. The game didn't care that I had school in the morning or that I had carefully memorised my favourite characters' preferred gifts from an online walkthrough before bed. The stakes created by the dichotomy between my world and the world inside my handheld somehow became part of the fun.

The dangers of handheld gaming, such as the detrimental dead battery, were prevalent in another in-between space where I often found myself as a child: the car. My siblings and I were frequently carted around to run errands with our mom before we were old enough to be left at home alone. Even when I was old enough to stay home, it was a well-known fact that my mom would get Sonic Drive-In or some other kind of fast food for anyone that accompanied her in the car, and that was usually a tempting enough bribe for me.

Luckily, I was well-equipped to take my handheld consoles on the road. My first handheld, a teal Game Boy Color, travelled in style in a yellow cross-body bag with a cerulean strap and trim to match. The phrase "gotta catch 'em all!" was printed on the top flap, and Pikachu was depicted on the front, suspended in an exuberant jump. I wore the bag as if it were a purse, even pairing it with my baby pink Sunday dress and white sandals for church. For Christmas in 2003, my older brother Mike and I both got these giant metal briefcases to carry our Game Boy Advance consoles, games, and accessories. My brother and I joke now about how those briefcases made us look like Kaiba from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* animated series. But at nine years old, I found the briefcase incredibly cool; it made me feel powerful and serious. By the time I had a Nintendo DS when I was 12 years old, I had a different idea of cool that didn't involve carrying cases of any sort. Instead, I would just bring my DS around in my hand or sometimes try to fit the thin brick of a device into the absurdly tiny pockets of my jeans.

Regardless of how I carried my handheld, I'd start playing as soon as I was in the car and tended to stop mere moments before I was required to get out. There was nothing worse than the red indicator light suddenly making its appearance when I was caught in between the time it would take for me to find a save point and the time it would take for my mom to pull up to our destination. It was common practice to leave the game on in the car until we got back, and if the battery wasn't low there was little risk of tragedy. If there was nothing else for it, I'd slip the

console into the pocket on the back of the front seat and pray (often literally) that the battery wouldn't go out during the time I was away. It would make whatever activity we had been on our way to completely unenjoyable because I would obsess over how long it had been and how likely it was that the game had turned off. After returning to the car, I would dive into the back pocket and rescue my game from amongst old receipts and Cheeto crumbs to see if there was still a chance. Of course, sometimes the console would simply have died and there was nothing to be done. Those occasions where the game still lived felt like miracles. But there was still the race to see if a save point could be reached before the game shut off. Finding the game still on against all odds only to have it shut off three minutes later felt so much worse than if it had simply died while I was away.

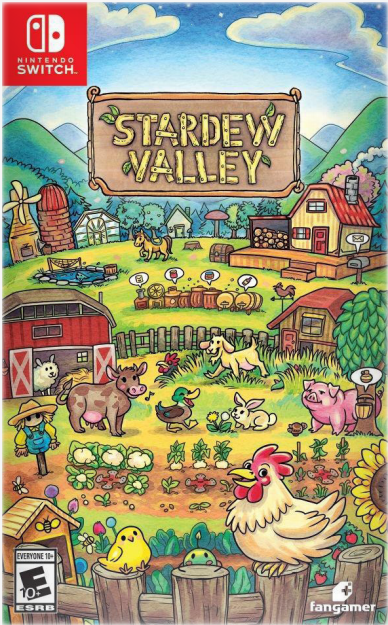
Yet again, the world of handheld games set itself as a world apart from my own. My mom must have gotten so fed up with me and my siblings asking for one more minute in the hot car, or one more minute with the backlight still on so we could see our screen at night. But my mom's agitation and my pleading were of no concern to the world inside my Game Boy. Sure, I could bring the game world around with me — in a pocket, a metal briefcase, a cross-body bag — but it wasn't mine. Handheld games were both somewhere I went and somewhere I took with me.

One summer, my family moved to Valdosta, Georgia. We only ended up living there for a few months before moving back home to Vegas, but we didn't know that would be the case when we took the four-day road trip across the country to get there. Road trips in general were their own beast where handheld gaming was concerned, again with different rules and rituals. Being based in Vegas granted us access to road trips of only four or five hours to reach theme parks in California or camping sites in Utah. My brother would usually engineer some type of gaming gauntlet for the two of us to undertake whenever we went on such a trip. We almost always started a new save on whatever *Pokémon* game was newest at the time, a tradition that was easy to maintain across the years thanks to the regular release of new *Pokémon* titles. Back when we had the battery-operated consoles like the Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance, we planned ahead with extra AA batteries that we could switch out during the trip if needed. The Nintendo DS didn't run on batteries, of course, so we had to be sure to charge up before we left and would just play until the battery ran out.

The trip to Valdosta, however, was unlike any other I had been on. Four days in the car turned my normally in-between moment into something that was happening all the time. All six kids, both my parents, and four hamsters made for an interesting trip, but not a terribly entertaining one. I didn't take as much joy in playing a handheld in the car as I normally would have and found myself turning to other forms of entertainment, like drawing, writing, and reading manga. Even after this trip, not to mention the

second four-day journey back just a few months later, I started to branch out with what I filled the in-between spaces of my life with. After getting my own room in middle school, I also got a small television set that I would watch into the late hours of the night instead of conducting my normal *Harvest Moon* ritual. When I got an iPod, I began to listen to music as I fell asleep each night and thought about characters and plot points for my early novel-writing attempts. Instead of playing games in the car, I would sometimes read instead. Then in my teen years, I started to grow really close with my mom over long conversations we had with one another in the car.

In some ways, handheld games beginning to take less of a role in my life was a sign that my own world was expanding, and I didn't need to have my pocket-sized one at the ready all the time anymore. New interests and new technology became available to me, and the amount of in-between space that I had to occupy began to shrink. It's been difficult to recreate the same feeling that handheld gaming gave me when I was just a Game Boy kid. I'm excited by the developments that have been made in video games during my lifetime and I love my Nintendo Switch, but lying in bed with *Stardew Valley* just isn't the same as those nights with *Harvest Moon*. I think it's more about a time in my life than it is about the games or the consoles themselves. And I hope some kid somewhere is up way, way past their bedtime on a school night playing a game in bed right now. I wish I could still go back for a moment to a warm night at home in Las Vegas, my Game Boy making my hands sweaty as I raced towards a simple but oh-so-important goal.



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Stardew Valley
[Nintendo Switch]
2017

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Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town
[Game Boy Advance]
2003



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METROID DREAD.

Metroid Dread took nineteen years to come out after its mainline predecessor *Metroid Fusion*, but I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about the insurmountable leap between it and MercurySteam's previous *Metroid* game, *Metroid: Samus Returns*. *Samus Returns* was a good game, a very good game that came out far too late in the 3DS' life cycle, but I don't think there's a better example of the sheer leap in power between two generations of Nintendo's handheld hardware. *Samus Returns* was a chunky, relatively low-poly 30fps adventure that looked great on the small screen, but compared to *Metroid Dread*, it's little more than child's play.

Metroid Dread is an absolute *stunner* and gives evidence by the boatload that raw power will always be playing second fiddle to solid art direction. Despite everything happening on a two-dimensional plane, the entire planet of ZDR is teeming with life and environmental detail, making it 100% feel like you're in an alien world rather than just 'a game'. Further adding to this, I honestly think that the animation of Samus in *Metroid Dread* may well be some of the best the industry has ever seen. It's all the *little* details that make it so: Samus resting her hand on a wall if you try to run against it, the effortless grace with which she aims her arm cannon in any and every direction, the raw power she exerts as she executes a Shinespark. In an industry plagued by stiff limbs and auto-generated lip flapping, *Metroid Dread* stands out.

And this is on a handheld merely one generation younger than the 3DS. There have been substantial generational leaps before, but handhelds have always had a harder time than home consoles with performance given the fact that this one little machine is responsible for *every single part* of whatever game you slap in it. Visuals are all well and good, but is it actually any fun to play? Yeah.

The delightful animation is reflected entirely by how liquid-smooth the gameplay is. Exploring the world, shooting enemies, tackling terrifying robots that want to steal your DNA from your face — none of it would be half as good as it is if everything wasn't so ultra-refined. Long-time *Metroid* fans aren't left in the cold either, there's lore aplenty to sink our ravenous teeth into, and a certain boss even has specific animations and sequences for being damaged by moves that you shouldn't even be able to access by the time you reach them. Yes, the devs knew you'd break the game and planned to reward players for grabbing powerups entirely out of order.

For games like this, I tend to play on my TV, but I actually played a good 50% of this exceptional piece of artistry whilst on a caravanning holiday with my partner and her mother. Sitting in a barely insulated box and defeating the final boss of a game I'd sunk ten hours into whilst wearing headphones may not be what anyone at MercurySteam or Nintendo were intending, but that's the kind of magical experience I thought I'd left behind with my childhood. You can't beat that.

DOOM ETERNAL.

It can't be overstated just how much of a thrill it was when the 2016 reboot of *DOOM* was announced to be coming to Switch. Many people reasonably assumed that Nintendo's console wasn't powerful enough, but all those nay-sayers were put to proverbial rest when it launched. Yes, it only ran at half the frame rate of the PlayStation and Xbox versions, but it worked, and that was a miracle. Imagine the feeling, then, when the sequel *DOOM Eternal* was confirmed to be bringing its new and improved blend of demon-squashing first-person action to the very same system. Despite the success of the first entry, people assumed that due to all the fancy new technology, mechanics, and grizzly location-specific gore, the Switch once again wouldn't be enough of a beast to handle proceedings. Thankfully for them, a tool for measuring the sheer scale of their wrongness doesn't exist.

It may have been delayed nine months after the other systems, but when it landed — ho-ho, what a treat! Nothing had been stripped back, somehow all the technical advancements and complex new AI, animations, and sheer number of independent enemies on-screen made their way onto Nintendo's handheld-cum-home console. Perhaps you've blasted the faces of countless demons already on another system, can you imagine that running on a device that consumes as little as 8 watts? Not only that but running *well*?!

Of course, it would all be for nought if the game wasn't any good, but that's an element you shouldn't worry yourself over. The basic gameplay ideals remain from *DOOM* (2016), but this time ammo is scarce as all heck. You're constantly forced to switch between the different weapons in your arsenal to best suit the situation because, if you don't, you could easily find yourself stuck with ammo only remaining in the wrong weapon. Think the breakable weapons from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and you might get a better understanding of why this change was somewhat divisive.

But me? I'm having none of that point of view; going back to *DOOM* (2016) after *DOOM Eternal* makes that particular smash hit feel borderline glacial in comparison. In the space of five seconds, you can move from sniping the gun off a four-legged mechanical scorpion demon-thing (Arachnotron) to lobbing a grenade into the mouth of a glorified floating eyeball (Cacodemon) to tearing the heart from a bloated, twin flame thrower-wielding monstrosity (Mancubus) and shoving it down its throat. And if that sounds like an exceptional set of circumstances, I can guarantee you that *DOOM Eternal* has far more ludicrous situations you can find yourself in. It's not going to be everyone's cup of tea — it's hardcore, sensationally fast-paced, unforgiving, and bloody. But if those are the boxes you like ticked, just remember that you can experience the whole thing cleanly and smoothly on a bright pink handheld that uses less power than a decently bright LED light bulb.



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Metroid Dread
2021



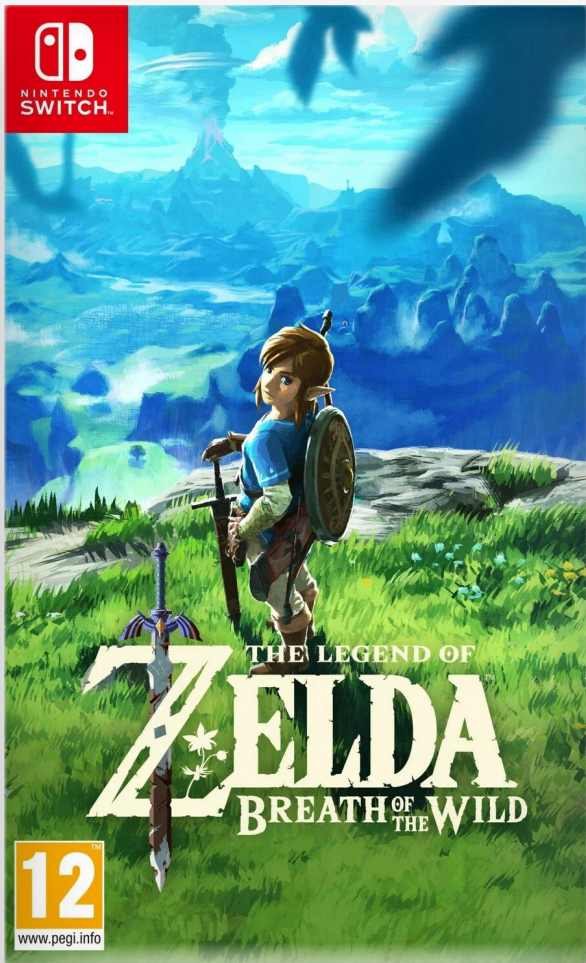
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DOOM Eternal
2020



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ARMS
2017



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The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
2017

ARMS.

What's this? A fighting game that pushes motion controls in a book all about handhelds? Yes, I must admit it's not your typical choice, but the whole of ARMS can indeed be played in handheld mode — but realistically if you're going TV-less you're better off playing in tabletop mode. And frankly, I can't think of a better poster child for this oft-forgotten method of play on the Switch.

ARMS was released at a weird time — the Switch was still wet behind the ears and Nintendo was decidedly screaming “look, we’ve learnt from our mistakes! We’re not just forcing motion controls into our games!”. Then they released ARMS.

In ARMS you hold one Joy-Con in each hand with your fingers wrapped around the SL and SR buttons and your thumbs resting neatly on the L and R buttons. It’s not a commonly used way of holding a pair of controllers for obvious reasons, but it does somewhat remind me of all the terrible old joysticks I used to use on my Windows 95 PC back in the day, and that’s got to count for something.

The whole schtick is that your real-life punches, wrist twists, and more, correlate to real actions in-game, and whilst this sounds like a disaster on paper, everything is so tight and refined that this becomes a genuinely competitive game. The big in-game gimmick is your arms (ha!), as they can stretch to absurd lengths to reach your foe who’s standing many metres away. It’s socially-distanced boxing, and it works far better than I think it has any right to. Colourful characters, an endlessly entertaining gameplay loop, and a skill ceiling substantially higher than any person would reasonably assume, ARMS has got the lot.

I remember first getting the game after a press event in London. I left *ever-so-slightly* early in order to catch my last train before they became unreasonably expensive for four hours. I missed it by less than a minute and retired dejected to a pub in Paddington Station. No sooner had I sat down than I got the email with my code for the game. I had *loved* what I’d been able to play in the past, so I started downloading the full-fat edition onto my Switch there and then using all my phone’s mobile data and then some. It was a slow, painful process but I was there for so bloomin’ long that by the time I had another suitably-priced train waiting for me, it was ready to go.

I sat down on the train, perched my console on its delicate little kickstand so that only I could see it, and proceeded to weird out the entire carriage as commuters no doubt wondered what I was doing with a screen tilted away from their prying eyes and two brightly coloured slabs clutched in my sweaty palms as I punched away at nothing. No one can say that about *Elden Ring* now, can they? I love you, ARMS.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD.

Let me just start this by saying that no matter what you read here, I will inevitably be unable to do justice to this game in such a short space. The thing you have to understand with *Breath of the Wild* is that it isn’t just celebrated for being a good video game; it’s almost unrivalled in its field.

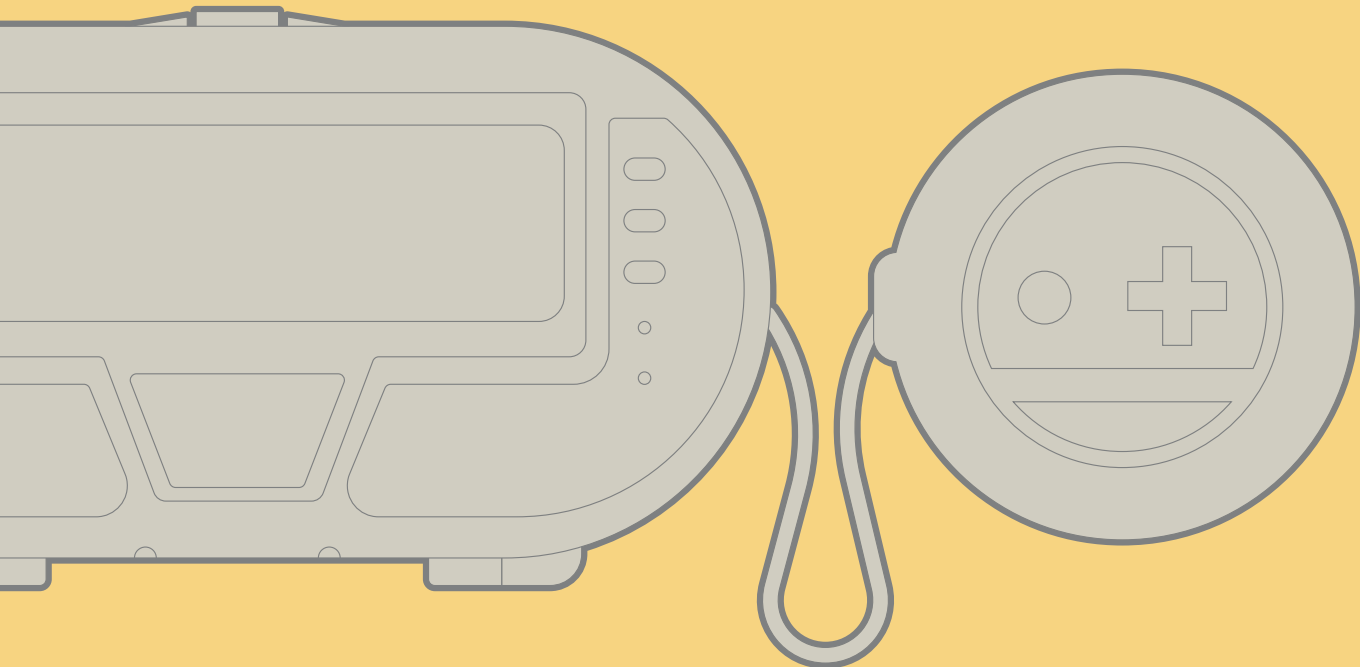
Some open-world games have bigger maps, more weapons, more sub-quests, but not one of its competitors does *nearly* as many things so effortlessly well as this game. Nintendo took a tremendous gamble with the game’s initial launch, not only due to it being delayed year after year and generating endless hype, but also because it was such a radical departure for the *Zelda* series. And yet somehow they managed to blow expectations completely out of the water with a game so deep and consistent in its design that new discoveries are being unearthed even as I’m writing this.

The basis of the story is as simple as it always is — Ganon has done some dirty sinful business in Hyrule and it’s down to ol’ Linky boy to put a stop to it. Unlike other games though, as soon as you’ve bested the tutorial there is no hard barrier stopping you from waltzing right up to the Demon King and smashing his face in before the rest of the inhabitants even know you’re alive. Don’t kid yourself, only extremely experienced players will be able to do this, but the simple fact that it’s even possible is exceptional. As soon as you’re off the Great Plateau the whole world is yours to explore, and I don’t mean that in the sense that you’ve got several options for things to do; I mean literally *the whole game* (bar a few extremely select exceptions) is waiting for you to dive in, whether you’re ready or not.

And what a game it is; there’s so much content here it would be overwhelming in almost any other package, but *Breath of the Wild* doesn’t ever bombard you with quests, waypoints, or arbitrary goals. You can do as little or as much as you like, and the game just lets you crack on with it.

Many puzzles and quests initially appear to have only a single solution, but that is almost universally not the case. The game makes use of a ‘chemistry engine’, whereby various elements affect others in a consistent and reliable way. Metal conducts electricity, wood burns and floats in water, ice reduces the nearby temperature — it all culminates in an endless journey of discovery. If you’re in a chilly environment and you’re starting to take damage from the cold you can equip warm clothing if you’re *boring*, or you can equip a flaming sword to keep the frost at bay.

So rarely in a game does a thought process go from ‘would this work’ to an actual result with such consistency, and the bite-sized quests and experimental nature are superb when your Switch is docked, but the fact that you can play such a deep, rewarding, surprising, and exciting game on the train, on the bus, on the toilet... It’s all a little too blinking perfect, frankly.

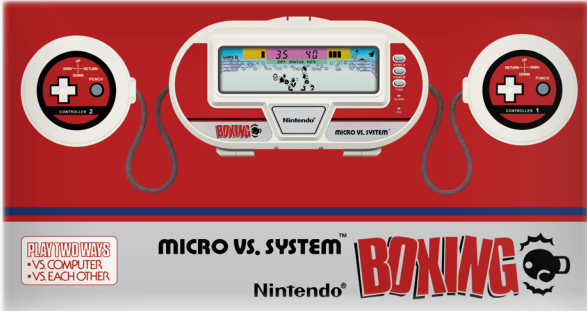


Micro VS. System

Manufacturer Nintendo

Outside The Box

While games such as *Boxing* can be found used and unboxed for around £100 on auction sites at the time of writing, boxed examples are more likely to fetch £350. Rarer examples of Micro VS Systems can sell for as high as £750.



I’ll be completely honest with you — after years of reviewing and collecting handhelds, this is one device that went under my radar for quite some time. In fact, I only heard about it after stumbling across it on eBay in 2021. Of course, I bought it.

The more I played with it, and the more I researched what Nintendo’s intent was for this device, the more I learned that it is, in fact, incredibly similar to the Nintendo Switch. Just by looking at it and seeing how it works, it’s clear that the Nintendo Switch actually took a lot of design inspiration from the Nintendo Micro VS. System.

Built in 1984, the Nintendo Micro VS. System was a portable addition to the popular VS. System, Nintendo’s arcade cabinets produced between 1984 to 1990. It was Nintendo’s goal to give avid gamers the chance to put their favourite arcade games in their own pocket with the ability to play with friends and family on the go.

Nintendo launched a handful of variants, mainly because they could only fit one game onto each console due to it featuring a static design within the LCD screen, along with a lack of memory within the console itself. For example, there was *Donkey Kong 3*, *Boxing*, *Punch-Out!!*, and *Donkey Kong Hockey* available to buy, each featuring the ability to play using the very unique controllers.

From the outside, the Nintendo Micro VS. System looks like a handheld console without any controls at all, but the magic happens when you start to crack open the handheld’s clamshell design, which reveals two hockey puck-like controllers attached via a retractable cable. These two rounded controllers fit perfectly inside of the handheld, making it a magnificent way to keep the device as portable as possible. On each controller you’ll find a tiny D-pad and one action button, making it easy to understand for friends who might have never played a video game before.

They’re not the most comfortable controllers out there, but even so, you’d instantly be the coolest kid on the block when seen extending them as your friend sets up the perfect lighting angle for the LCD to be somewhat visible. When you’re done with playing, you use the winding

mechanism on the back of the controllers to retract the cables, allowing you to then perfectly place them in their designated slot to then close the clamshell back into its more portable form.

This, for me, is one of the coolest features about the Nintendo Micro VS. System, and you can tell that whoever worked on this at Nintendo really went all out with designing it for portability and multiplayer activity in mind, especially when you consider this was designed in the mid-80s. Even the clamshell itself has a use because it’s used to prop up the screen when playing on the go, just like the Nintendo Switch’s kickstand.

The Nintendo Micro VS. System is actually a part of the classic Game & Watch series, as evidenced by the fact that it has two game modes and a time mode, allowing you to use this as a clock should you want to. Oh, and the fact it runs off two tiny little watch batteries.

As much as the Micro VS. System looks badass, it wasn’t as successful as Nintendo initially hoped, which makes it hard to find any information regarding actual units sold during its time in the spotlight. With some games fetching hundreds of pounds on auction sites today, you can assume that they likely sold in small numbers.

Putting that aside, however, I think it’s worth noting how much the Nintendo Micro VS. System influenced Nintendo’s future consoles. As much as the general Game & Watch line influenced the Nintendo DS, the Micro VS. System’s clamshell design certainly was a particular influence also, and the way it opens up to allow more efficient playability is a nod to the Nintendo Switch’s kickstand. The same comparison with the Switch goes for the two controllers as well, making it an awesome portable handheld for multiplayer gamers.

The Nintendo Micro VS. System was incredible for its time, and it’s a handheld that still slides under the radar of many to this day due to it somewhat failing at launch. But that doesn’t make it a terrible handheld. In fact, I’d personally say it was one of Nintendo’s most innovative handhelds to date.



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Pokémon Party Mini
2001

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Smoochum Purple Edition
2001

The **Pokémon Mini** is a handheld crafted by Nintendo, who were hoping to compete with the ever-so-popular *Tamagotchi* from the late ‘90s and early ‘00s. It was Nintendo’s smallest console that used cartridges to play games, and had a tiny library of only about ten, most of them Japanese exclusives.

It was also Nintendo’s first handheld to have motion controls built into the device with its tilt sensor, and also featured ‘shock’ feedback — it was their only handheld to have the rumble mechanics built into the console itself, as the Switch has this feature within its detachable Joy-Con controllers.

It was officially launched in 2001 in Japan (prior to the GameCube) and eventually made it to the US and Europe a few months later. At just 70g and 3 inches in length [very close to the size of an egg] this tiny handheld was extremely portable and came in three different editions to excite *Pokémon* fans: Whooper Blue, Chikorita Green, and Smoochum Purple. This console was released after the popular *Pokémon Gold* and *Silver* games, which revealed a wide number of brand new Pokémon, three of them being the characters behind these different editions.

Each console came with *Pokémon Party Mini*, a game that required you to use the tiny screen to play a number of mini-games including *Hitmonchan’s Boxing*, which requires you to shake the device to engage with the Pokémon — this made it a far more interactive console compared to that of the *Tamagotchi* as it took advantage of the built-in motion controls. This was one of the biggest selling points of the console, alongside the ability to trade and play with your favourite second-gen Pokémon.

Just like the *Tamagotchi* this device so resembled, the Pokémon Mini had an absurdly large amount of battery life. Using just one single AAA battery the device could last up to 60 hours of play time, making it a long-lasting pocket-friendly option that kids could dive into for hours on end without demanding parents go to their local supermarket to aid their AAA battery addiction.

The handheld had a transparent front shell and, depending on what colour you went for, the buttons and backshell were slightly different, making you subconsciously think that you had to ‘collect ‘em all’. Nintendo was (and still is) very good at doing these mental marketing tactics — they’re taking *Pokémon*’s ‘gotta catch ‘em all’ catchphrase far too seriously when it comes to console variants.

Unlike many of Nintendo’s other handhelds, the Pokémon Mini was purposely misshapen and had a tail-like corner to the device which added to its cuteness. This may have been an intentional change to make it look different to the *Tamagotchi* and Nintendo’s own Pokémon Pikachu console, or it could have been a much less cynical adjustment in order to add more grip to the device for when the user is pressing the added trigger button on the right-hand side. We may never know...

Due to the Pokémon Mini’s size, the cartridges had to be designed to meet the console’s portable nature, which meant Nintendo had to build cartridges even smaller than their typical Game Boy Advance cartridges. These were typically transparent and featured a small lip on top for easier insertion and removal from the device. Nintendo also added a cart lock to the device in hopes that gamers wouldn’t lose cartridges when they were aggressively using the motion controls. This was likely to have taken inspiration from the original Game Boy DMG’s cartridge lock.

It turned out to be an adorable handheld that sold well according to Nintendo, even if it was launched at a time when home consoles were exploding in popularity. It didn’t outperform the *Tamagotchi* because of the large price difference, but it did pull in avid *Pokémon* enthusiasts and gave them a new portable handheld to use when on the go.

Nintendo also launched it at the perfect time. *Pokémon Gold* and *Silver* had sold over 23 million units worldwide, giving Poké-enthusiasts even more reason to hop on this new handheld console. I remember the launch of *Gold* and *Silver* vividly as a child — it was as if the only thing the world was talking about were these games, so when kids came into school with this new Pokémon Mini handheld it was really only a matter of time before others started bugging their parents for one too.

Greeted as a smaller, more affordable Game Boy for the younger fan, it did what it intended to do very well — even if there was a very limited choice of games.

Pokémon Mini

Manufacturer	Nintendo
CPU	8-bit, 4 MHz Epson SIC88
Display	96 x 64 pixel monochrome LCD
Price	JP ¥3,990
	US \$39.00
	UK £29.99





PLAYSTATION PORTABLE.

First Released:
2004

Manufacturer:
Sony

Launch Price:
JP ¥19,800
US \$249.99
UK £179.99

The second half of 2001 felt like a watershed moment for 3D gaming worlds. On PlayStation 2, a console dominating the market in its second year, *Grand Theft Auto III* rewrote the rules on what an open-world video game could be, giving players a real-feeling city to follow well-written stories and simply cause chaos within. On the same platform came Konami's exceptional survival-horror experience *Silent Hill 2* and stealth-action essential *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*. The newly released Xbox console introduced the superlative *Halo: Combat Evolved*, taking first-person shooters to new heights, while Nintendo's GameCube launched with the cutesy and creepy *Luigi's Mansion* and one of the greatest *Star Wars* games ever in *Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader*.

Home consoles had never been more immersive, their visuals never more detailed. Finally, here were virtual worlds we didn't need to let our imaginations do the heavy lifting with — what we saw on screen was transportive enough. Handhelds, however, were still following a largely two-dimensional direction. Nintendo's Game Boy was 12 years into its lifespan and had reformatted itself both as a Color version in 1998 and, in the spring of 2001, evolved into the Game Boy Advance. Its launch line-up in the West featured a wealth of recognisable names — *Rayman*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, *Super Mario Advance* — but despite 32-bit capabilities, the GBA felt more like a Super Nintendo in your pocket than anything truly advanced.

But just three years later, in December 2004, Sony would release a portable console that not only made Nintendo's hardware of the time look hopelessly old-fashioned at first blush — however many screens it arrived with — but also took those enveloping 3D experiences of contemporary home consoles into a handheld format.

The PlayStation Portable didn't carry a particularly exciting name, being

a fine example of a product doing what it says on the tin — or in this instance, doing what it says on a beautifully sleek and glossy black shell. It hit shelves first in Japan, before reaching the US in March 2005 and Europe in September of the same year. But PlayStation Portable — cut down to PSP from the first breath of its announcement at E3 2003 — didn't need extravagant branding to make an impact. PlayStation was in its tenth year and had conquered the gaming world across two hugely successful home consoles — all it needed to do was offer players an opportunity to hold the franchises and characters that they loved in their hands and take them with them, and it'd be enough.

Only, that wasn't all Sony was proposing. The PSP was announced not just as a gaming system, but as 'the Walkman of the 21st century'. On stage at the Los Angeles Convention Center, in May 2003, the 'father of the PlayStation' Ken Kutaragi — the man who'd fought for Sony to enter gaming in the mid-1990s with their original PlayStation console — told the attending media that PSP would offer "a world where all kinds of entertainment, like games, music, and movies, are going to be fused together". Kutaragi believed that this device would and could do so much more than the competition, namely the Game Boy Advance, which by early 2003 had added an illuminated screen with its clamshell-style SP model.

And while Kutaragi wasn't wrong — when it launched, the PSP's capabilities far outstripped Nintendo's alternatives — early adopters of Sony's handheld didn't rush to use it as much more than a gaming machine. It could play a wealth of movies and TV shows on a bright and crisp 480x272-pixel screen, capable of 16.77 million colours, via its bespoke Universal Media Disc format — dual-layer physical media capable of holding 1.8GB of data, a huge step up from Sony's earlier MiniDisc which maxed out at 140MB — and wireless functionality connected the PSP to an online store where digital content could be downloaded. But as

A Cinema In Your Pocket

The Universal Media Disc was not just intended for PSP games. Sony had big plans for making their portable console a haven for media of all kinds, with movies being at the forefront (no surprise given Sony's movie business). It's estimated that there were anywhere between 650 and 1000 UMD Video releases, including various blockbuster movies and TV series. With a maximum of 1.8GB available on a dual-layered disc, a standard movie could fit at DVD resolution, though they would play at only 480x272 on the PSP's screen.



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229

228
PSP-1000 Box
2004

229
PSP-1000 Ceramic White Box
2006

Sony Cat

The PocketStation saw the first game to feature Sony mascot Toro Inoue. *Doko Demo Issyo* (Together Everywhere) was the best-selling game for the tiny handheld, shifting 1.5 million copies. This title received a PSP remake five years later.



soon as smartphones achieved mass popularity with the first iPhone in 2007, they became the preferred platform for watching media on the move.

And as for music, Sony was woefully late to the party — Apple's first iPod was released in late 2001 and had already been dubbed a Walkman for the 21st century by the media. So sure, the PSP *could* be a home for your favourite artists and tracks, but the iPod was a superior option in every way.

The PSP's multimedia potential was never a major selling point to its most important audience, however. Those who already enjoyed PlayStation's products raced to pick up the new handheld — at launch in Japan the PSP almost sold out, selling over 171,000 units day one and leading to shortages at major retailers, and in the US it sold over half a million units in its first two days. In the UK, the PSP became the country's fastest-selling new system at launch, with 185,000 units sold in four days (in comparison the Nintendo's DS managed 87,000 week one, in March 2005). Estimated sales of 82 million across its lifespan make the PSP the most successful non-Nintendo handheld console of all time, far ahead of its successor, the PlayStation Vita.

The PSP's first-impression appeal wasn't hurt at all by its line-up of launch titles. In the US, big-name characters like Spider-Man rubbed shoulders with a wealth of licensed sports games fronted by stars like Tiger Woods and Wayne Gretzky (so important for that market, just ask Sega), while Sony also rolled out some franchises very familiar to PlayStation fans: *Wipeout*, *Twisted Metal*, *Ridge Racer*, *Metal Gear*. While not all of these played quite like the PlayStation releases before them — *Metal Gear Acid* was a card-based, turn-based

affair rather than a 3D action experience, for example — they shared plenty of vital, consumer-satisfying DNA.

Amongst these recognisable brands were more curious delights. *Mercury* was an unassuming but compelling puzzler with incredible liquid-metal physics. *Lumines* could easily be overlooked thanks to dull cover art, but the musical puzzler from Rez designer Tetsuya Mizuguchi, mixing *Tetris*-like block-busting with a clubland soundtrack, ultimately became a PSP must-have. Both *Lumines* and *Mercury* are the PSP at its best: easy to pick up and play for ten minutes, before popping them back in your pocket; intuitive and innovative with their presentation and moment-to-moment play; and they were made first and foremost with the PSP in mind, rather than being adaptations or weakened ports of larger, more ambitious experiences.

That said, the PSP quickly acquired an impressive library of titles which, on a cursory glance at least, looked to be the visual equal of anything on the PlayStation 2 or Xbox. *Grand Theft Auto III* never leapt from TVs to the PSP screen — it didn't go portable until a smartphone release in 2011 — but Rockstar published two 3D GTA titles for Sony's handheld, *Liberty City Stories* in 2005 and *Vice City Stories* in 2006 (Chinatown Wars followed in 2009 having first released for the DS, but opts for a top-down perspective). *Liberty City Stories* acts as a prequel to *GTA III*, with the player assuming the role of Toni Cipriani, a notable NPC in the PS2 game; and *Vice City Stories* sets up the events of the 2002 home console hit, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Both 3D GTAs for PSP achieved critical acclaim and enjoyed commercial success, and both received ports to the PlayStation 2, a rare instance of handheld-focused experiences being released for home hardware.

A lot of the gameplay taken for granted on home consoles of the time — and, indeed, of today — could work on the PSP thanks to its array of inputs. The PSP didn’t perfectly replicate the PS2’s standard DualShock 2 controller, lacking shoulder-mounted triggers (L2 and R2), a second analogue stick, as well as the pad’s vibration capabilities. But with its little analogue nub beneath the traditional D-pad, twin shoulder buttons and the familiar face foursome of the square, circle, cross and triangle, it could deliver many of the same kinds of genres seen on the PS2 and its peers. Albeit with one notable exception.

First-person shooters had, by the mid-’00s, long established the use of the right stick for aiming control (before *Halo* popularised it, *Alien Resurrection* pioneered this approach on PS1). The lack of this extra stick on the PSP led to some fiddly FPS attempts, with Konami’s *Coded Arms* using the four face buttons as the right stick and Activision’s *Call of Duty: Roads to Victory* criticised by reviewers for mapping aiming to those same buttons. The PSP never really received any FPS games that felt at home, a distinct failing when the genre was so wildly popular on other platforms.

Two genres that the PSP really was a fantastic home for, though, are racers and role-playing games. *Ridge Racer* and *Wipeout Pure* were launch titles that have never dulled in their appeal, the former translating arcade-style drifting to a small screen terrifically while the latter represented a fresh instalment in Psygnosis/Studio Liverpool’s futuristic anti-gravity racing series that could more than hold its own against ‘bigger’ entries. Later came a pair of Sega greats, in *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* and *Sega Rally (Revo)*, and games from the *Burnout*, *Need for Speed*, *Midnight Club*, and *Gran Turismo* series ensured that racing fans were kept glued to their PSPs.

On the RPG side, PSP owners were spoiled. The eternally popular *Final Fantasy* series was represented by a host of offerings, from a remake of the original 1987 game released for its 20th anniversary to an enhanced version of 1997’s *Final Fantasy Tactics*, subtitled *The War of the Lions*. Fans of the huge PlayStation hit *Final Fantasy VII* got to play through events preceding Square (Enix)’s seminal title, in the shape of the prequel title *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII*. Beyond this monolithic presence within RPGs, the PSP was also home to both genre curiosities, like Marvelous Entertainment’s *Half-Minute Hero*, and much-sought-after classics, including Atlus’ *Persona 3 Portable*, Level-5’s *Jeanne d’Arc*, and Square Enix’s remake of the Super Famicom’s celebrated *Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together*. Pick up a PSP today and some of the best RPGs demand eye-watering prices on the second-hand market — but they’re valued so highly for good reason.

Those wanting exclusive entries in established PlayStation franchises were treated, too. *Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters*, *Daxter* (spun off from the *Jak* and *Daxter* games), and *God of War: Chains of Olympus* were all brilliant instalments in their relevant series. *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* and *Tekken: Dark Resurrection* also represent excellent portable experiences that feel as complete as anything on home consoles (or, in the case of *Tekken*, in arcades). That same pick-up-and-play

appeal of *Lumines* and *Mercury* ran through the veins of *Patapon*, *Every Extend Extra*, and *LocoRoco*; and publishers including SNK, Sega, Capcom, and Midway all released great-value compilations for PSP, making it a fine choice for older gamers as well as those focused on the freshest experiences.

None of this is to say the PSP didn’t have its problems. It used a proprietary flash card memory system, Memory Stick PRO Duo, rendering regular, cheaper memory cards useless (this criticism wasn’t heeded, and the Vita also launched with its own exclusive system). UMD was a divisive medium at best, and sometimes the cases these tiny discs were housed in could snap in half just by removing them from their box. The unique combination of Memory Stick and UMD was also quickly cracked, mere weeks after its 2005 Stateside launch, leading to rampant piracy on the PSP (it’s a system that many use more for emulation than for its actual games).

A number of console redesigns attempted to make the launch PSP, the ‘1000’ model, better. The 2000 and 3000 kept the original’s general design but slimmed the unit and were generally well-received. But the all-digital, piracy-battling PSP Go of 2009 was a flop (despite its cool-looking sliding design, which housed its controls beneath a very smartphone-like top section); and the budget-priced PSP Street, released in 2011, felt a little too cheap for its own good, removing built-in WiFi and stereo speakers.

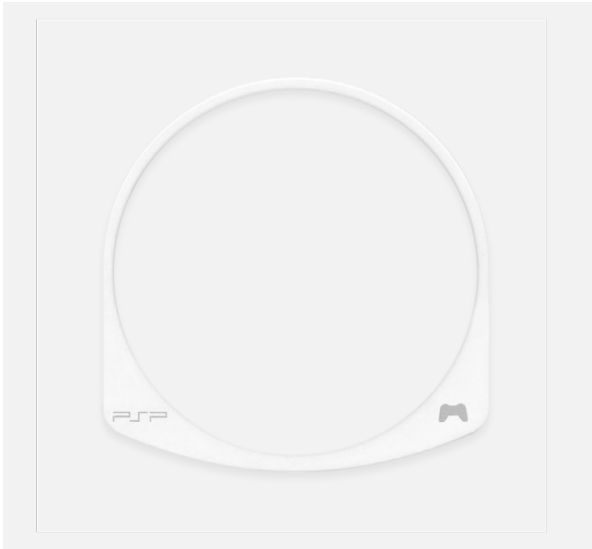
Quite simply, no PSP is as good in hand, or as premium of build, as the 1000 series: chunky in all the right ways, with a weight that’s reassuring rather than a pain on the wrists, every whir of its locked-tight UMD drive a comforting buzz on the fingertips. As these models near their 20th anniversary, there are reports of original batteries swelling and bursting — but unlike the PSP Go and Street, the 1000, 2000 and 3000 series have easily removable batteries, meaning they can last for as long as you can find replacements.

The PSP was officially discontinued by Sony in 2014, a full decade after its launch, clearing the way for the Vita — which never came close to replicating its success, its estimated 16 million sales closer to the five million of the Japan-only, PS1-compatible PocketStation (technically Sony’s first handheld), than the PSP’s tens of millions. The gulf between Vita and the 2013-launched PlayStation 4 was too vast for experiences to feel as comparable as the PSP-to-PS2 relationship, which may have contributed to its lower popularity — but in the first few years of the PSP’s existence, as it shared an ecosystem with the still-selling PS2, it genuinely felt like the best of home gaming had crossed over to portable play with barely a whisper of compromise.

PlayStation may never manufacture another handheld console again, but the PSP endures as one of its greatest-ever products: far from infallible but more than magic enough to see past its shortcomings. With a library of games so vast and diverse that it’s a wonderful system to both collect for and actually play with in the here and now.

Universal Media Disc

The Universal Media Disc (UMD) was able to store game data, movies, music and more. This tiny optical disc, housed in a plastic case, was capable of storing 900MB in a single layer and 1.8GB in a dual layer version. Content was accessed on the PSP via a red laser.



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230
UMD Top Shell
[64mm diameter]

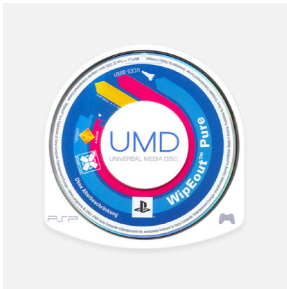
232
UMD Disc Cover
[Front]

231
UMD Disc
[Optical format]

233
UMD Bottom Shell
[4.2mm thickness]

Unofficially Yours

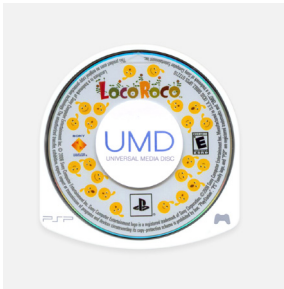
Unofficial, third-party peripherals are nothing new, but one interesting example for the PSP is the Lenkeng LKV-8000. This cable allowed the PSP to output to a TV via HDMI, including upscaling, which is especially useful for streamers and YouTube creators. However, they are rather rare to find these days.



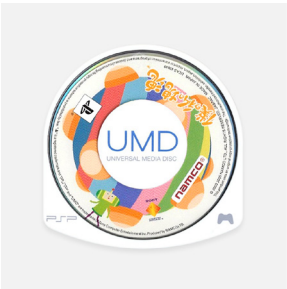
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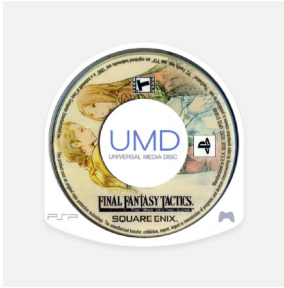
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Wipeout Pure

2005
- 238

The 3rd Birthday

2011
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Lumines: Puzzle Fusion

2005

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Metal Gear Acid

2005
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Patapon

2008
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Gitaroo Man Lives!

2006

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LocoRoco

2006
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Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions

2007
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PaRappa The Rapper

2007

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Me & My Katamari

2006
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Echochrome

2008
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WTF: Work Time Fun

2005



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247



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PSP Go!Cam

[1.3 mega pixels]
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PSP Memory Stick Duo

[32 megabytes]

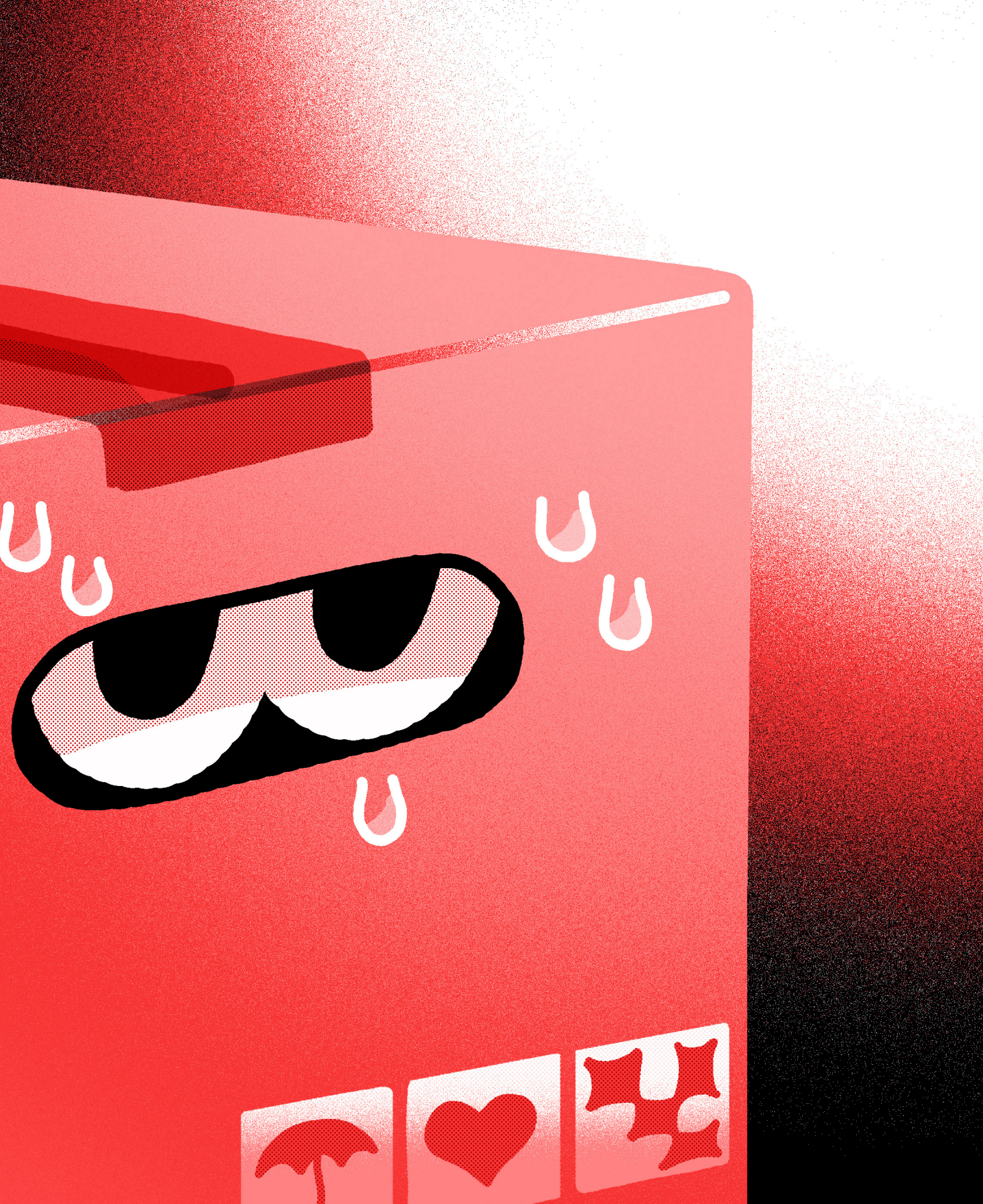
- 247

PSP TV Tuner

[Terrestrial digital tuner]
- 249

PSP GPS Receiver

[Navigation system]



A MATCH MADE IN OUTER HEAVEN.

words Jim Hargreaves

Sony's PSP boasted more original *Metal Gear* games than any other platform. In fact, the beloved handheld would play a pivotal role in the franchise, filling huge gaps in the series' timeline while introducing concepts that would later be refined in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. Revisiting these games has been bittersweet. The mid-to-late '00s were a much better time for Konami, years before unceremoniously bowing out of video games to focus on leisure clubs and pachinko machines, leaving its precious IPs to lay dormant and unloved. Beyond *Metal Gear*, the Japanese publisher had a great run on PSP with hits such as *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles*, *Yu-Gi-Oh! GX Tag Force*, and even its portable *Pro Evolution Soccer* series.

METAL GEAR ACID

Metal Gear Acid (or *Ac!d*, to be precise) launched on December 16th, 2004 in Japan, the exact same day as *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*. Neither game was a direct follow-up to *MGS2*, both steering in completely different directions. As series creator, Hideo Kojima, flung players back to the 1960s for some Cold War espionage on PlayStation 2, one of his veteran designers, Shinta Nojiri, would throw a similarly curious curveball for those who had just purchased a PlayStation Portable.

Not only did *Acid* propel the *Metal Gear* timeline forward to 2016, it branched off to build its own non-cannon corner of the MGS universe. This wasn't the first time this had happened (remember *Ghost Babel* on Game Boy?) and it wouldn't be the last, as much as fans want to try and forget *Metal Gear Survive*.

Acid follows a familiar setup as our hero, Solid Snake, prowls the fringes of a military compound. As always, he's racing against the clock, this time infiltrating a research lab on Lobito Island, deep within the fictional African territory of the Moloni Republic. Dragged out of retirement once again, he's tasked with recovering the enigmatic Pythagoras in order to meet the demands of a terrorist cell. They've hijacked a jumbo jet carrying senator and president-to-be, Viggo Hach, threatening to crash the plane and kill all passengers on board.

What made *Acid* such a memorable instalment in Konami's stealth 'em up saga wasn't the story though. If you, like my younger self, eagerly booted up a copy of the game without doing any research, you were likely left dumbfounded. Unlike those mainline MGS games which tout the strapline 'Tactical Espionage Action', *Acid* describes itself as an 'Active Command Intelligence Duel'. To translate: it's a strategic card game.

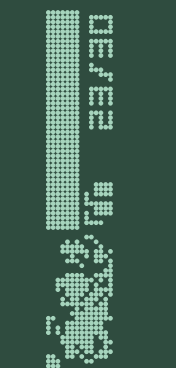
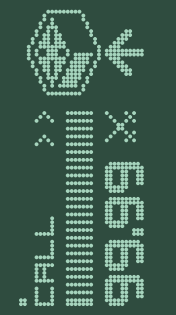
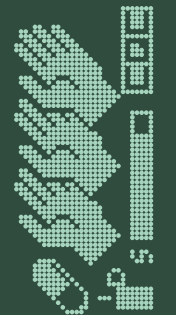
But how did this actually work? *Metal Gear Acid* is turn-based, allowing players to construct a deck of thirty cards that each come tagged with certain abilities, weapons, and bonuses. Stages take the form of fully 3D, grid-based maps in which characters move from square to square in order to reach their objective. With six cards in your hand, you're limited to using two of them per turn, either activating their abilities or cashing them in to move three squares across the board. Of course, a major part of the game was anticipating what your enemies will do on their turn, making sure you'd avoid their line of sight or reach a perfect vantage point to gun them down. *Metal Gear Acid* did a very good job of distilling the series' stealth-action gameplay into something that feels more methodical and strategic while still preserving those core staples. That's not to say it was a flawless genre swap. Critics were right to pick holes in the sluggish pacing between turns as well as the frustrations that come with having your available actions dictated by random card draws. Stumble upon a minefield, for example, and you may have to aimlessly dispose of half your deck before finding a detector card to equip.

Acid's gradual introduction of diverse cards allowed for more varied playstyles as you advanced, collecting and buying booster packs along the way. On a second playthrough,

Origins Of Metal Gear

Released in 1987 for the MSX2, *Metal Gear* introduced the world to Solid Snake and famed auteur Hideo Kojima. It also laid the foundations for the future *Metal Gear Solid* series, featuring bi-pedal war mechs and copious amounts of stealth action.

art Hannah Kwan Cosselmon



your deck of 30 cards could be completely different to what you originally started out with. It's not hard to imagine what kind of microtransaction nonsense would accompany such a game if Konami had launched *Metal Gear Acid* today. As a true sign of the times, it even allowed players to input cheat codes to unlock powerful cards; some of them are based on characters from Kojima classics, *Snatcher* and *Policenauts*.

Metal Gear Acid could be played in competitive multiplayer via the PSP's ad-hoc wireless network feature. Upon completing the game, you could also unlock the 'MGS3 Link' feature, allowing you to plug your PSP into a PS2 console running *Snake Eater* in order to unlock an exclusive bonus weapon.

METAL GEAR ACID 2

Less than a year later, Konami launched *Metal Gear Acid 2*. Not only did the sequel rock a drastic new style, it also improved on the card-based gameplay of the original, ironing out many frustrating foibles. Snake is at the helm once again and, in typical video game protagonist fashion, has a serious case of amnesia. To make matters worse, he's ambushed by the FBI, who strongarm him into his next covert missions.

The sequel wasn't a particularly great game for lying in bed, cradling your PSP in search of some light entertainment. Not only were the strategic battles more involved, the story took players on another cerebral rollercoaster. Amid the shady side-switching and a literal clone war, it was easy to lose the thread as alliances formed and dissolved, all while Snake attempted to piece together his memory. Waiting for you at the end was another nuclear war machine, the tongue-twisting Metal Gear Chaioth Ha Qadesh.

From the brash character designs to the user interface, *Acid 2* was dripping in style. Easily the most unique-looking game in Konami's fabled franchise, the developers opted for cel-shaded graphics and funky menus that popped with a futuristic flair. Under the hood, *Acid 2* sported a refined tactical core, making it far more fun and intuitive than the first game. With over 500 cards to unlock, upgrade, and build a deck with, the sequel supercharged that sense of strategic agency. Not only that, it was packed with quality-of-life improvements that gave the player more intel on enemies with fewer cards wasted from turn to turn. Missions were punctuated by puzzle-like boss battles, spotlighting ostentatious villains such as Chaigidel, Golab, and Vince. Speaking of villains, the all-new Arena Mode also allowed fans to go up against favourites such as Revolver Ocelot, Vamp, and The Boss, battling across maps inspired by iconic *Metal Gear* locations.

Those who purchased a copy of the sequel brand-new were also treated to another experimental feature. Tucked beneath the instruction manual was a mysterious piece of glossy black cardboard. Known as the Solid Eye Tobidacid, this forgotten article of PSP paraphernalia wrapped around your handheld console, extending slightly with two eye holes. Then, by triggering the in-game Solid Eye mode, the screen would show two images side-by-side. Viewing them in tandem created a 3D effect, almost like a primitive version of Nintendo's 3DS. For some reason, *Acid 2* crams in a number of bonus video clips to watch via this gimmick, as real-life Japanese models pose against serene backdrops.

PORTABLE OPS

Not all *Metal Gear* gimmicks would be forgotten, however. An experimental idea that debuted in the franchise's next PSP entry would go on to shape the future of the series forever.

While those first two PSP games were nothing short of solid, fans were left aching for a more traditional MGS experience on handheld. Directed by Masahiro Yamamoto, *Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops* gave us exactly what we wanted, replicating that classic stealth-action formula, albeit in a more condensed format, with some obvious limitations. Control-wise, *Portable Ops* had you moving with the left stick and positioning the camera using the neighbouring directional buttons. As in many games, including Capcom's *Monster Hunter Freedom* series, this forced players to awkwardly twist their left index finger into a claw in order to simultaneously move the character and camera.

Set six years after *Snake Eater*, the PSP sequel helped fill some blanks within the Big Boss saga. It was also brought to life by motion cutscenes drawn by Australian artist, Ashley Wood, whose work would feature elsewhere in the series, as well as the official *Metal Gear Solid* comic,

which spanned 24 volumes.

Drugged and taken captive by rogue FOX operatives, Naked Snake must battle his former elite unit who have taken over a soviet missile base in Colombia, preventing them from starting a nuclear war. We know this is a mainline *Metal Gear* game almost straight away thanks to the historical and political exposition, briefly explaining Cold War concepts, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Strategic Arms Limitation Talks of 1972.

With the help of a younger, mulleted Roy Campbell, Big Boss escapes his cell, topless and battling with nothing but his bare fists. That said, it isn't long before he becomes a walking arsenal, befitting of his legendary soldier status. However, it's not his hand-to-hand CQC training or deft marksmanship that make him such a powerful protagonist; it's his charisma and ability to command. We see this in full force during *Portable Ops* as he begins to recruit enemy soldiers to his cause

This becomes a massive gameplay focus too, scouting and disabling enemies before dragging them back to your truck for conversion. Instead of going into missions alone, you could assemble a squad of up to four characters, switching between them freely. Collecting soldiers was strangely addictive as you dived deeper into this game system, optimising units based on their weapon proficiencies and bonus traits. There was an intriguing meta layer to this too, as you created spy, tech, and medic teams to gather intel and develop equipment for out in the field. *Portable Ops* rewarded players with a satisfying sense of momentum as they turned the tables against FOX. Instead of killing them, you can even recruit villains during the game's boss battles, including the Pinhead-like Python, and Null, who fans will recognise as the OG cyborg ninja, Gray Fox.

The story climaxed with a showdown against the bird-like Metal Gear RAXA, piloted by main antagonist, Gene. His importance within the series' lore is often overlooked, yet he is the one who instils Big Boss with the idea to create his own nation of soldiers, leading us straight into *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*.

Before then, we'd witness yet another *Metal Gear* experiment on PSP. In 2007, Konami released *Portable Ops Plus*, a standalone expansion with its own physical UMD. This was before the advent of digital downloads and DLC. *Plus* being a must-have addition for fans of the original game. With new soldiers to recruit (including unique characters from other *Metal Gear* titles) it swapped story missions for a new 'Infinity Mission' mode. This gave *Portable Ops* a roguelike twist, pitting your squad against a series of randomly generated levels before extracting with any rewards. If your characters died, however, they were gone for good!

PEACE WALKER

Gamers will be familiar with *Peace Walker* more than any of the other PSP instalments. After all, just a year after its original release, it was remastered as part of the *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection* which launched in 2011 for PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PlayStation Vita. On top of that, it was helmed by Hideo Kojima, who had originally wanted to call the game *Metal Gear Solid 5: Peace Walker*, though ultimately

the number was dropped due to it being a handheld title.

As it approached its twilight years, it had become agonisingly clear to Konami what kind of PSP game performed best. At the time, it hadn't made much of an impact overseas, yet *Monster Hunter* ruled Japan's handheld software market, spawning myriad co-op action games. Konami clearly wanted a slice, but how would Kojima and his team bend the *Metal Gear* formula to fit this completely different mould?

In truth, much of the groundwork had already been laid in *Portable Ops*. Instead of playing through a linear story, spliced with hours of prolonged cutscenes, *Peace Walker* is chopped into more than 150 short, stealthy — and mostly optional — skirmishes, perfectly portioned for gaming on-the-go. However, in terms of scope, it would become the biggest *Metal Gear* game to date — ironic, considering it was crafted for Sony's smallest gaming system.

The story fills a crucial gap in the series' timeline, charting the events that lead from *Snake Eater* to the formation of Outer Heaven, the baddies from the first-ever *Metal Gear* released for the MSX2 back in 1987. It does a great job exploring Big Boss as a character while introducing key figures who later appear in *Metal Gear Solid V*. Kojima Productions conceptualised a meta layer to the game that had fans just as excited to fiddle with Mother Base menus as actually playing through the missions themselves. The more soldiers you recruit, the more addictive this management-like aspect becomes as you get closer to unlocking powerful gear and stat bonuses.

As for the moment-to-moment gameplay, it was far tighter than *Portable Ops*, borrowing heavily from MGS4. Gunplay, movement, and stealth were far more dynamic here though the PSP showed its limitations more than ever. No matter which of the three control schemes you opted for, there simply weren't enough inputs to navigate levels, neutralise enemies, and sift through your inventory seamlessly.

Perhaps more divisive was the game's preoccupation with co-op multiplayer. Instead of being its own isolated mode, nearly all main story missions could be played with up to three others. While this added a new dimension to the *Metal Gear* series, it negatively influenced other parts of the game. For instance, if you were looking for memorable boss battles, *Peace Walker* sadly comes up short as you duke it out against bullet sponge war machines, including a *Metal Gear* of your own design. These inelegant showdowns shunned the series' stealth-action mantra, forcing you to chip away at honking health bars with every bullet and explosive Big Boss could physically carry.

Despite some shortcomings, there's no ignoring just how important *Peace Walker* is to *Metal Gear Solid*, largely informing Kojima's final game in the saga, *The Phantom Pain*. It effectively served as a blueprint, allowing the team to incubate experimental ideas that were later executed in MGS5's open-world setting, leveraging the power of superior console hardware.

It's hard to imagine where *Metal Gear* would be without the PSP. Although there's a certain magic to those mainline entries that can't be topped, Konami's run of games for the plucky handheld were wonderfully experimental, culminating in a swansong that would change the trajectory of *Metal Gear Solid*, and Kojima Productions, forever.



TAKE US BACK.

In October 2008, the PSP's native online store opened and hosted hundreds of downloadable games, from smaller titles, such as *Susume Tactics!*, *fIOW*, and *Go! Puzzle*, to handheld counterparts to some of Sony's biggest home-console games, like *Gran Turismo* and *Resistance: Retribution*. The quantity, quality, and variety of these games indicate what the PSP stood for both on its own as a handheld and as an extension of both PS 2 and the PS 3's popular ecosystems. These games rivalled the experience found on consoles, giving us broad open worlds, bright graphics, and in-depth gameplay systems, while showcasing the extent to which these little portables could be pushed during the time of the burgeoning handheld game market. Before the influx of indie titles and cheap mobile games we see today, Sony was willing to invest in games with more flexibility and creative freedom, and at varying prices and lengths. For example, the PlayStation Minis brand, which consisted of short, downloadable, arcade-style games that were no more expensive than a couple of pounds, found success with over 1 million being downloaded between October 2009 and July 2010 across 85 titles.

Developing the PSP as a place for both the home console crowd and as a haven for cheaper, more experimental titles was a successful move, with the handheld selling around 80 million units as of March 31st, 2012. Sony's confidence in the handheld market and an 'all-digital' future is evidenced by their release of the PSP Go in 2009. This variant was digital-only and relied on the PlayStation Store to keep its install base afloat. It was ultimately viewed as a failure, however, selling just 17,000 units in its first four months on the market in Japan. Numerous reasons may be cited for its lack of success, such as its use of the slower Wireless B internet protocol instead of Wireless G that we know today, and its expensive £224.99 launch price. Yet, crucially, Sony's lack of foresight, misplaced faith in digital, and a relaxed attitude toward game preservation may be this system's ultimate failing as it is now useless without any games already installed because of PlayStation's recent online store closures.

The Great PlayStation Network Outage

For 23 days in 2011, the PlayStation Network was taken offline and customer information was stolen by hackers taking advantage of an exploit. Some Capcom games were unplayable during this time, all PSN functionality was down, and, worst of all, it was revealed that data stolen included unencrypted credit card information. Many investigations, lawsuits and regulatory fines were instigated against Sony due to this breach. PSN customers were offered a number of PS3 and PSP games as an apology.

The ability to purchase games on the native PSP store via categories and tiles ended in 2016, yet players could download previously purchased content, perform searches, and make in-game purchases. They then announced in April 2021 that all functionality on the PSP, PS3, and PS Vita stores would be shut down, making hundreds of downloadable games unavailable for purchase. This angered many fans who felt like Sony was blind to the very titles that made their systems special. In a gaming world where online connectivity and greed often take precedence, this decision seemingly ignored both the love for these games and handhelds, and any reverence that players have for a warm, creative, and more simple time in gaming history. This decision was (mostly) reversed, with Sony Interactive Entertainment's president, Jim Ryan, stating that "it's clear that we made the wrong decision here...We see now that many of you are incredibly passionate about being able to continue purchasing classic games on PS3 and PS Vita for the foreseeable future." This was an extreme turnaround from his previous comments on game preservation and PlayStation backwards compatibility ("why would anybody play this?"), and a welcome step in the right direction, but the existence of these games, and others on the PS3 and Vita, remain uncertain.

On July 2nd, 2021, the PSP's purchase functionality ended entirely and while 35 games might have gone missing forever because of their digital store-only presence they should, in theory, be available to download from the PS3 and Vita. To access the likes of *Beats* and *Ape Quest* on the actual PSP you must either have bought them already or purchase them on the ageing PS3 and transfer them across via cable or memory card. Downloading and playing on the Vita is the best way to go, because of its more modern interface and comparative ease, yet there are numerous hurdles in place if you want to experience these downloadable PSP games in their original handheld form. The Vita's store might now be described as a digital wasteland, with game curation being poor and numerous games missing key art, which you may only see if you are lucky enough to connect to the store at all. From my own experience, purchasing these games on Vita is an imperfect solution,



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Rain [PlayStation 3]
2013

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LocoRoco: Midnight Carnival [PSP]
2009

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Tokyo Jungle [PlayStation 3]
2012

particularly when you cannot even pay with a credit or debit card and must use prepaid PlayStation Network cards to buy anything. Even though the loss here will be small in comparison to the number of PSP games available physically, how easy is it to get these games in boxed form once they are no longer around to buy digitally? Famously, Square Enix hasn't even released two of its most popular PSP games, *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* and *Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep*, on digital stores and so the only way to play them is by scouring eBay for used copies to play on your steadily dying PSP from 2005.

While you may argue that no one is clamouring for some of PSP's more obscure offerings, the lack of care attributed to their preservation has the potential to spiral outwards to every downloadable game you have ever loved. Ryan's comments state that they will continue to support the PlayStation Store on PS3 and Vita "for the foreseeable future", and when those stores inevitably do shut down more than one hundred other games will be lost, such as *Tokyo Jungle* and *Rain* on PS3. These games, no matter how strange, are burned into my mind and have a familiarity that is threatened by such store closures. Should I continue to add to my digital library on PlayStation 5 knowing that in a decade or so most of my beloved games may be stranded on dying systems? How long until the ability to access a download list goes away forever because of continued server costs, or Sony's fear of vulnerabilities in its online software? Many answers veer towards the negative. It's becoming more and more ironic that the promising 'all-digital' futures we have been pushed towards with almost every facet of our lives seem to be contributing to so much loss and anxiety.

Why then is the PSP a source of nostalgia, and why is there such a fuss around these digital games becoming increasingly rare? For me, PlayStation has always been home. The boxes themselves — and the games that bring them to life — shaped much of my childhood with creativity. I will never forget my time with *Crash Bandicoot* and his penchant for Wumpa fruit, or swinging a sword as *MediEvil's* Sir Dan, the one-eyed skeleton lacking a lower jaw. When the PSP came out, these memorable experiences could come with me anywhere. I could lie at night in my cosy bed and visit Liberty City, or ancient Greece, or a strange world of colourful singing blobs. I could be transported elsewhere with ease.

For me, PSP games were not only fun, but they were also safe. They lacked the connections that modern gaming has upheld, and I wasn't bombarded with notifications, map markers, microtransactions, or anything resembling a re-sellable JPEG when I played them. Katharina Niemeyer, writer and editor of *Media and Nostalgia*, refers to this sensation as the "bittersweet longing for former times and spaces", with a future (or present) full of technology causing an increase in expressions of nostalgia, nostalgic objects, media content, and styles. Nostalgia is not a style or a trend, but often expresses something more profound, a way of living, imagining, and sometimes exploiting or reinventing the past to counteract a crisis of temporality. It erupts forth from memory to escape the present or the looming future and is a therapeutic reaction to 'fast technologies' and the emotional or psychological pain that they envelop. Nostalgia is the craving to slow down, and, for me, acts as not only a byproduct of media but as a component of much of our lives. This process involves seeing or even feeling aspects of the past in a very tangible way. Nostalgia doesn't even have to be for something high-quality or compelling.

In terms of PSP preservation, this is a good thing because some of the games threatened with dissolution are anything but. Take *Ape Quest*, for instance, an *Ape Escape* spin-off title that focuses on the eponymous characters in a fantasy RPG. While its bright graphics, humorous tone, and funky score may be entertaining for a short period, its repetitive battles and minigames, on-rails movement, and general stiffness make it somewhat unappealing compared to the hundreds of fantastic RPGs already present on the PSP. That does not mean that this game should be extinguished forever.

Its gameplay is relaxed, almost monotonously so, but the comfort that comes from this, along with the game's signature, googly-eyed apes, transports you to a realm of safety. The images and sounds that emanate from *Ape Quest* will probably be familiar to most PlayStation fans, with the game even using the PSP's font for its menus and HUD. Its entire score is bouncy and tropical and provides the game's silly apes with an adequate soundscape to partake in fantastical, turn-based battles.

Another game with comforting and uniquely PlayStation aesthetics, and another potential loss in the digital store shutdown, is *LocoRoco: Midnight Carnival*. This spin-off title, released after the first two games in 2009, was designed specifically for the Halloween season and features the demonic, red Bui Buis as its central antagonists. Just like in the main series, *Midnight Carnival*, while short and PSP-smashingly difficult in its final few levels, is the epitome of originality. It features seven singing, blob-like creatures of varying colours (the LocoRoco) who must bounce their way through levels by rotating the earth. However, this time, they can combo super jumps to bounce both faster and higher. The colourful weirdness of the entire affair balances out the difficulty, as the LocoRocos coo along to the score in a world full of weird rectangle snakes, fat owls, and strange inflatable bird-elephants. While I am specifically nostalgic for this smorgasbord of little freaks, it is the comfort of the familiar that makes these games special. I am comforted by the progression they entail, the time they take me back to, and the safety of their gameplay loops and familiar worlds. With *LocoRoco: Midnight Carnival* I am free to move around in colourful, gentle settings, experiencing rewards not just from beating each level, but through investment in both the visual and aural. Playing these games is not just enjoyable in the present, but takes me back to a simpler time where distraction was my primary mode of being, and not just a pastime amongst other adult necessities.

One of the benefits of analogue media is that you can return to different places in time whenever you please, satiating that nostalgic itch, but the disappearance of these games heightens a disconnect between the past and present. The break in temporality of which Niemeyer writes cannot be reconciled, and the pain of losing part of your adolescence only seems to grow. We are not only losing games to dying systems and online store closures as players, but the developers that worked hard on concept art, programming, game design, scores, and more, no doubt feel these losses as well. When they announced in early 2021 that these stores would close, I made it my mission to purchase one game a week to make sure that I had a record of as many games as I could save, with *The HD Adventures of Rotating Octopus Character* and *Coconut Dodge* leading the charge. Now, while I am glad some games have been spared, there is still not enough being done by Sony to circumvent these unfortunate changes. If playing on the original system is no longer viable, then there should be an alternative measure in place to preserve these games for both the developers that made them and the players that made them a part of their lives.

There is hope, however, that Sony may be looking to

turn things around and save these games from eternal deletion. In June 2022, PlayStation Now folded into PlayStation Plus Premium, the highest in a series of new tiers of PlayStation Plus that includes a mixture of PS4 and PS5 games along with many titles from the PS3, PS2, PSOne, and PSP, including the likes of *Tokyo Jungle*, *LocoRoco: Midnight Carnival*, and *Rain*. It remains to be seen what PSP games will continue to be offered, but my guess would be the more well-known and popular offerings. This, along with Sony's hiring of Garrett Fredley as a Senior Build Engineer for PlayStation's newly-created Preservation team, seems to suggest that the legacy cemented by this handheld system will continue despite having to leave its little plastic shell behind. In its 2004 press release for the PSP, Sony described it as "the Walkman of the 21st century." High praise and confidence in its ability, no doubt, but this does not do it justice as not only a piece of hardware, but as a place where imagination, creativity, and comfort could thrive. Preserving this element is of the utmost importance and should be Sony's priority if it wishes to continue to be recognised as the pinnacle purveyor of both heartening and offbeat gaming.



Go Away

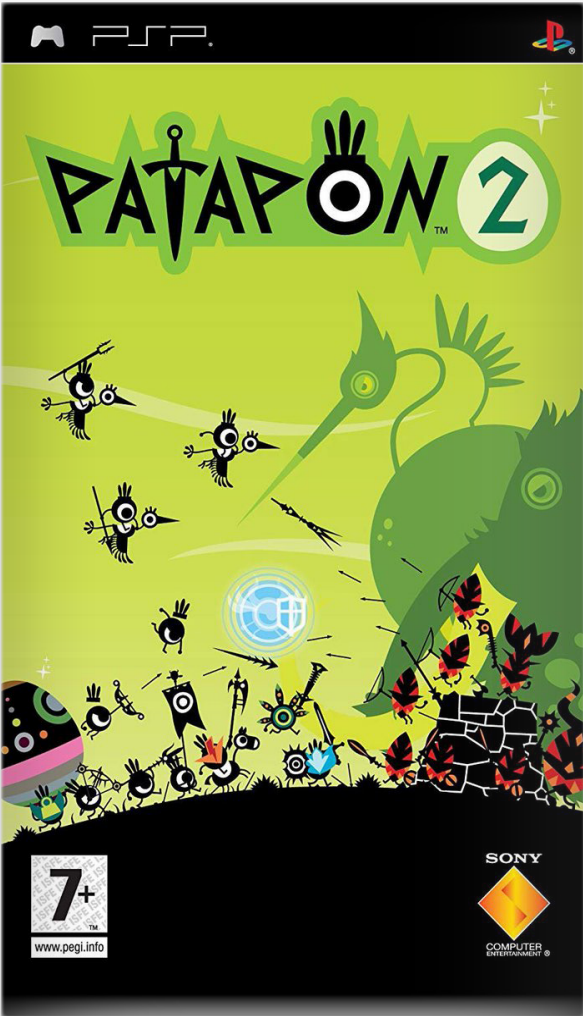
While the slide-out controller of the PSP Go was admittedly kinda cool, the removal of the UMD drive was not. Although Sony promised that all titles released physically from October 1st 2009 would also receive a digital version, that left almost four years worth of games with no promised digital release — titles like *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* and *Metal Gear Acid*.

take us back.



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Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII
2008



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Patapon 2
2009

CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VII.

Ahead of its release, I was unsure if I would enjoy *Crisis Core*. After all, I had played *Final Fantasy VII* and I knew the ending to Zack’s story. It was a big surprise, then, that I actually ended up liking it more than *FF7*. Why did I think it was better? Well, it was Zack. We had a glimpse of him in the original game which didn’t do justice to his upbeat nature and infectious personality; he was just so likeable that it made his journey and the game’s ending all the more sadder.

At the start of the game, Zack is a mid-level member of SOLDIER — Shinra’s elite fighting force — with dreams of becoming a hero like his idol Sephiroth. Throughout the game, Zack is put through various trials and tribulations, and he learns more about Shinra’s evil machinations. Despite the dawning realisation of his employer’s nefarious nature, he doesn’t lose his positivity. He always wants to do what’s right and he remains honourable. That was the power of the game — making you want to fight for Zack, hoping that you could change the outcome; which ultimately, you could not.

In terms of gameplay, it’s an action RPG through and through. You can perform a regular attack and you can use different materia representing different actions or magic — for example, cure, fire spell, or thunder spell. You can’t just constantly use magic though, as you have an MP gauge that gets depleted as you use it. You press X to execute a move, square to dodge and use the shoulder buttons to cycle through the abilities.

Like most RPGs you do level up, which increases your stats, but the way this was executed in *Crisis Core* drew criticism at the time. You see, you don’t have a regular experience gauge like many RPGs. Instead, battles have this slot machine type system called the Digital Mind Wave that is constantly running while you’re in a battle. As it spins, it can give status improvements like unlimited magic use or invulnerability; when it lands on three matching character faces then Zack is able to execute a special move, and if you get 777 on the number gauge you level up. At the time of release, there were complaints that it all felt a bit too random, although I didn’t personally have a problem with it.

Many of the biggest PSP games were made available digitally on PSN, but this was not the case for *Crisis Core*. It was only released physically on the device, which limited the number of people that could experience the game. However, in June 2022, Square Enix announced that they would be remastering the title for current home consoles with the updated name *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion*. Finally, more people will be able to experience this superb entry in the *Final Fantasy* franchise and learn what made this game so special.

PATAPON (SERIES).

The PS3/PSP years were memorable for PlayStation fans for all those quirky and unique titles that Sony were releasing. As someone who had always been more focused on AAA games on the PS2, this period was a breath of fresh air and helped me discover some amazing experiences that have stuck with me more than a decade later — including *Patapon*.

If you’ve played any of the three games in the series, just the name can instantly make you recall that addictive little ditty: “Pata-pata-pata-pon!” Even my wife, who only saw me playing it once on a plane ride in 2008, can recall the easy-to-remember tune. This is a rhythm game, but with so much more to it. It’s got battling, RPG mechanics, gigantic bosses to contend with, and a gameplay system that forces you to really learn and understand the enemies.

You play as a god who guides a tribe of warriors (shaped like little eyeballs) as they sing, march, and fight to the catchy beat. As their god, it is your job to bang the sacred war drums to the beat of the music in order to direct the Patapons to walk, attack, defend, or retreat — different four button combinations would direct the Patapons to perform different actions. The Patapons have to face giant monsters and other warrior tribes on their lengthy journey to recover their lands, though I found it was the perfect length to chip away at in bite-sized chunks — it was so addictive. A mission could last just a few minutes, which was the right amount of time to justify just one more go; it actually ended up being several more! When *Patapon 2* was announced, I knew I had to have it.

The sequel was an expansion on the first game. It didn’t change up the gameplay very much, but it refined and improved it while also introducing a better levelling and development system to unlock new character classes. I would happily grind boss battles again and again to get the material I needed to unlock a new class. *Patapon 2* took everything that was good about the first game and made it better. I was so glad that it had even more boss battles and a lengthier campaign to keep me playing for even longer. It was a game I enjoyed so much that I double-dipped and bought it digitally because I knew I always wanted it installed on my PSP so I could return to it again and again.

Unfortunately, the third game did not click in the same way. Instead of controlling an army, you now controlled four hero characters and the difficulty was ramped up to the point of frustration. I recall hitting a wall after 20 hours and just giving up. Despite the third game not quite living up to my high expectations, I would still wholeheartedly recommend *Patapon 1 & 2*. All these years later they still hold up as fun, charming and addictive rhythm games. Sing it with me: “Pata-pata-pata-pon!”



PLAYSTATION VITA.

First Released:
2011

Manufacturer:
Sony

Launch Price:
JP ¥24,980
US \$249.99
UK £229.99

The first reveal of the PS Vita (or ‘Next Generation Portable’ as it was code-named at the time) in January 2011 was incredible! Here was a device that promised to bring the AAA experience of games like *Call of Duty*, *Uncharted*, and *Metal Gear Solid* to a handheld with a beautiful OLED screen and dual analogue sticks. The 3DS was releasing around the corner but Sony completely stole Nintendo’s thunder and made their device look like a gimmicky toy for kids. In fact, Sony’s marketing was on fire for most of 2011 — the games looked impressive, the functionality and design were praised by the media and even the reveal of the Vita’s price was seen as reasonable for the tech being sold. But the good news ended abruptly in September of that year when they revealed the price of the Vita’s proprietary memory cards.

Complaints about the price of the Vita’s memory cards are still heard more than 10 years later. The Vita launched first in Japan in December 2011 and those little storage cards were ridiculously expensive — the 32GB card cost half the price of the actual system! To make matters worse, Nintendo had cut the price of the 3DS and was hitting its stride with game releases. Gamers could buy a 3DS with *Mario Kart 7*, *Monster Hunter 3G*, and *Super Mario Land* all for the price of the WiFi-only Vita with no games or memory card. The result was that, in Japan, the Vita was outsold by the 3DS in the week of its launch — never a good sign. Sales fell off a cliff and two weeks later it was even being outsold by its predecessor, the PSP. The system hadn’t even launched in the West and it was already being declared dead.

The Western launch, in February 2012, was very impressive in terms of its game library. Over 20 titles were released alongside the system including new games from AAA console franchises, such as *Uncharted: Golden Abyss*, *Wipeout 2048*, and *FIFA*, ports of console games like *Ultimate Marvel Vs. Capcom 3*, and smaller indie titles for gamers on a budget, such as *Escape Plan* and *Super Stardust Delta*. It was hailed at the time as one of the best launch lineups for a gaming system, but the weeks that followed were bereft of new titles, which led to gamers declaring that the Vita had no games — a reputation it had difficulty shaking for its entire life.

Sony tried to bring console-quality titles to the system, but the results were inconsistent. For every quality game like *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* and *Gravity Rush*, there were disappoint-

ments like *Borderlands 2*, which was playable but suffered from severe slowdown and graphical compromises. *Call of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified* was also panned by critics for being short (the single-player could be beaten in an hour) and having uninspired level design. *Call of Duty* surprisingly still sold well, but the Vita really needed a ‘killer app’ — that one, must-have, big game that alone justified the purchase of the system. *Persona 4 Golden* is often considered to be this, as it was loved by many and is still considered to be the best game on the Vita, but in reality it was too niche to appeal to the mainstream market. The PSP benefitted from having three *Grand Theft Auto* titles, two of which were the top two best-selling games on the device. The Vita needed something on that level, but despite Sony’s efforts, it did not materialise.

It was a rough start to be sure. Sony tried to breathe some life into the system with a cheaper, OLED-free, Slim iteration released in 2013. This model gave the system a shot in the arm in Japan and sales started picking up — not massively, but it was an improvement. It was finally outselling the PSP in Japan, which was certainly a positive. They also released the PlayStation TV which was a mini-console version of the Vita that hooked up to a TV — which proved to be a complete failure and was discontinued after less than 3 years.

Expecting mobile gaming to be the future of the industry, the Japanese giant launched a new service called PlayStation Mobile — a curated storefront of games that could be played on select Android phones and the Vita. There were some great game releases and Sony did everything they could to encourage indie developers to bring their games to the service, including waiving the cost of launching games and providing some development funding, but it didn’t take off on phones. This endeavour therefore also turned out to be a failure and was discontinued after only a few years.

PlayStation Now was the final big innovation on the Vita. The streaming service came to the system in 2015 in North America and parts of Europe. It was a great idea — if Sony wasn’t going to support the device with new games, PS Now could provide a solid library of PS3 titles to play. It only launched in a few countries so it didn’t have much of a chance to succeed and, in reality, unless you had an extremely strong WiFi connection, it was not playable. PS Now lasted for just over two years on the console (though would live on for much longer on Sony’s home consoles).

Vita Game Card

A far cry from the UMD of the PSP, the Vita game card employed a proprietary flash memory format. Early titles allowed saved games to be stored right on the card, with rumours stating Sony had intended to allow companies to store downloadable patches on the card too — though this feature appears to have been ditched.

PS VITA CONSOLE VARIATIONS

Outside of a few colour variations and special editions, the Vita didn't see many variations outside of its native Japan. This didn't stop it from having some truly beautiful designs, however.



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Piano Black
[PCH-1000]
2011

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Neon Orange Slim
[PCH-2000]
2015

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White Slim
[PCH-2000]
2014

258
Aqua Blue Slim
[PCH-2000]
2015

Aside from these attempts to clawback success, Sony gave up on the Vita very quickly. The last big game they released was *Freedom Wars* in 2014 — which was a game both myself and many others loved, as evidenced by its 73 out of 100 average on Metacritic. Since Sony wasn't supporting its own system, other big Western companies decided to follow suit and abandon the device, but it wasn't ditched by every developer and publisher.

Indie and Japanese devs in particular found that the Vita audience was very supportive and willing to try new experiences. For many, it became a portable Steam machine with some of the best indie games of that period releasing on the system, including *Spelunky*, *Hotline Miami*, *Bastion*, *Rogue Legacy*, *Fez*, *Limbo* and many, many more. Visual novels, like *Danganronpa* and *Virtue's Last Reward*, and JRPGs, like *Persona 4 Golden* and *Muramasa Rebirth*, thrived on the device. The Vita came out during the years when Sony was making a big push to bring indie games to their systems. The Strategic Content team, headed up by Shahid Ahmad, took a lead in courting smaller devs and was responsible for expanding the library of PS Mobile releases.

Despite the negative perception, fans who truly delved into the system's library found a multitude of games to play — and play them they did! After just a year on the market, Sony declared that the Vita had an impressive attach rate of ten games sold per system. The final number will likely never be known, but Vita owners had a reputation for buying games and, in particular, there was a hugely loyal audience for physical games (something I can attest to as someone with a collection of over 300 Vita games). The system actually kicked off the limited print games industry. It was in 2015 that Limited Run Games (LRG) launched the physical copy of *Breach & Clear* on the Vita, following which they expanded to other platforms, and other companies emerged to also sell titles printed in small quantities. Who knows whether that whole industry would have even emerged if it weren't for Sony's handheld.

At E3 2013, Jack Tretton, former President and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America, said that the Vita was to be the “ultimate companion to the PS4.” This was in reference to its Remote Play functionality which allowed it to stream any PS4 game and play it on the handheld. It was impressive technology, although it was reliant on the player having a strong enough internet connection to make it work well, and the lack of L2/R2 triggers on the handheld meant some games were not best suited for play on a Vita. The PS4 was smashing sales expectations and Sony hoped this would help push up sales of the Vita. It might have, but since the company refused to provide the numbers for Vita sales, it was impossible to know for sure.

Despite Sony not even bothering to mention the system at E3 after 2014, it somehow kept chugging along. The games kept coming and Vita fans kept buying them. Each year there were predictions that it would be the Vita's last, but then more games were announced. Sure, the releases were slowing down over the years, but it took Sony to actively stop new game releases for the system for it to truly meet its end. It was a long and awkward road with Sony slowly ripping off that plaster.

It began in 2019 when Sony announced Vita production would end in just a couple of months. They then stopped producing Vita carts in the West a month later. Despite the

dwindling player base, the core Vita community was nothing if not loyal. New releases kept coming and the developers were celebrated for continuing to support the system — NIS were noteworthy for launching some great games late in the Vita's life, eastasiasoft kept the physical games coming for as long as they could and even Square Enix released a game in 2019 for the device.

In 2021, Sony made the shocking announcement that they would be closing the Vita store, giving players just four months' notice. After strong backlash from fans, the company partly reversed their decision and allowed the store to remain open, but new game releases, and even game updates, would cease from July 2021. While fans were glad the store would be staying open, terminating new games was hugely disappointing and to make matters worse, Sony was not communicating with game developers. There were titles in active development for the system that had to be cancelled, which was frustrating for the developers that couldn't get their games completed in time. Fortunately, the final few months had some great new indie releases such as *Scourgebringer*, *Astro Aqua Kitty*, *Habroxia 2*, and *Russian Subway Dogs* (which was released on the final day for new games on Vita and was an excellent send-off for the system).

Looking back, Sony seemed to make so many missteps with the Vita. They blamed mobile phones for destroying the handheld market, and yet the Nintendo Switch showed that there was still a market for portable gaming machines. The inclusion of augmented reality gaming, front and back cameras and the rear touchpad turned out to be gimmicks that were featured in hardly any games at all — I'm sure many agree that they would have been far better substituted for some in-built storage and proper L2 and R2 triggers. The price of the memory cards will forever haunt the system's reputation and many will point to it as the reason the device did not sell well. However, Sony also failed to properly support the Vita with new games. The 3DS also performed badly at first, but Nintendo doubled down, dropped the price and kept releasing games — giving players a reason to buy the device. Sales of the 3DS picked up, but Sony took the opposite approach, and perhaps, unsurprisingly, they paid the price for this.

Vita fans can't help but look back at what could have been if Sony had done things differently. Could we have had a new *inFAMOUS* title or would Ken Levine's *Bioshock* strategy RPG have come out if the device had found more success? Regardless of what could have been, the Vita was still a fantastic device with a superb library of games. Picking one up and playing it, it's hard not to be instantly wowed by the stylish metal frame and the gorgeous OLED screen, and those that choose to delve into the titles on offer will still find an impressive selection of games that are unique and memorable.

The Vita is one of the few systems to be released by a big hardware manufacturer that did not get a successor. It was underrated by the media and underappreciated by Sony, but despite the lack of big-budget titles and support from its creator, the games kept coming for nine and a half years — far longer than anyone could have predicted. It continues to be played by loyal fans who understand how truly special this little system is. It became my system of choice and I will no doubt continue to work through my library of games for years to come. Kazuo Hirai, former CEO of Sony, famously said “Vita means life”, and indeed it does.



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259
PlayStation TV [EU box]
2014

261
Phantasy Star Nova PS Vita TV
2014

260
Gundam: Extreme VS Force PS Vita TV
2015

262
PS Vita TV [Japan exclusive version]
2013



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263
Gundam Breaker Console
2013

265
Persona 4: Dancing All Night Console
2015

264
Light Pink / White Console
2014

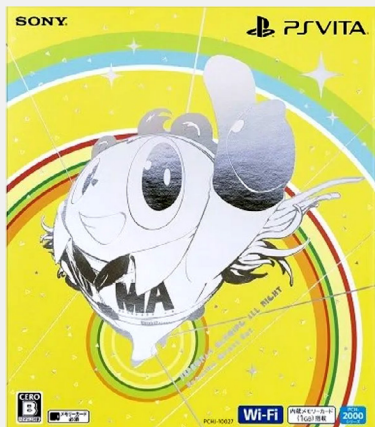
266
Metal Slime Edition Console
2015



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267
PlayStation Vita Slim Black
2014

269
SaGa: Scarlet Grace Edition
2016

268
Dragon Quest Metal Slime Edition
2015

270
Soul Sacrifice Premium Edition
2016

271
Persona 4: Dancing All Night Edition
2015

273
Final Fantasy X & X-2 HD Edition
2013

272
Doko Demo Issyo Edition [Japan exclusive]
2014

274
PlayStation Vita Black
2012



FINDING A COMMUNITY.

When people ask what I'm passionate about and I respond "the PlayStation Vita", there is usually one response: the many kinds of why. Why are you so enamoured with a console whose creator tried so hard to smother it? Why do you cling so dearly to a handheld which has been made redundant by the Switch? Why do you hunt down, collect, and crave games for a console which is known for its limited library? I mean mostly it's just "the Vita is dead lol", but I thought I would expand on that concept for the sake of being verbose.

I can only attempt to explain to you the 'why' if you allow me to be a little self-indulgent in describing my past. People who obsessively collect, as I do, are usually dealing with a ghost. In many ways, my Vita collection is my way of dealing with a mind haunted by the memories of my birth mother. Over the years I have attempted to fill that mother-shaped hole inside myself with console variations and over six hundred games. To explain the why, I have to first explain the place from which I came.

I was 24 in 2014 and had just begun a new relationship with a man six years my senior, months after ending things with the man I thought I would marry. It was also my third year living in Japan, the place I escaped to as I attempted to put distance between myself and the oppressive weight of a childhood embedded with fear and punishment. I was still learning what it meant to be loved unconditionally. Living through a childhood where no matter what I did, how brilliant or caring I was, it was never enough. I wanted to enter into a relationship where I was enough; one where I could care and nurture and mother and help in a way I wished someone had for me.

He had depression, and he didn't want professional help. He didn't want professional help because he wasn't ready to admit that he had depression.

Depression manifests in all kinds of ways. His depression manifested in crippling indecision. We are not talking about indecision like should I take this job offer, or where should we go on holiday; though he couldn't make those big decisions either. This was indecision to the degree that he couldn't decide whether to play games or watch TV, and so he did neither. He couldn't decide what to eat, and so he starved. He couldn't decide what to wear, and so he never left the house. Not making a decision, though, is a choice in itself. You are making the choice to lie motionless in bed all day. A form of semi-voluntary catatonia.

I long for positive reinforcement. I want to be thanked, to be told what a great partner I am, to be loved. As he lay in bed all day, I lay there with him. I brought him food he did not eat, I gave him drinks he did not drink, and I made conversation which garnered no reply. However, it wasn't for the thank yous that I did all this. It was the guilt. The accusations that if I left the bed I didn't love him, I didn't care for him, and that I didn't want to be around him. I was taunted that my behaviour was the reason for his depression. If I was just more attentive, a better girlfriend, he wouldn't be this way at all.

He was my second job. I had an obligation to be there for him. It would be right to say that he alienated me from others, but it is equally correct to say I alienated myself. Even when I didn't get the validation from him, I got the validation from myself. I thought to myself what a good person I was for taking care of him through all of this, and also that I shouldn't give up on a man who I believed to be gentle and kind outside of his illness. I genuinely believed that if I persevered that one day he would get help. That one day he would manage his condition. And that one day he would thank me for the years I worked and the investment I made.

I looked for things to occupy me in the long hours I lay by his side. Originally I carried my 2DS with me, but I cycled everywhere, and the one thing that console is not known for is its durability. So I turned to my Vita. I had gotten it the Christmas following its release but had only played a handful of games that I'd received for review. At the time I adored RPGs and yet I'd never played the game which is synonymous with the Vita: *Persona 4 Golden*.

There were several advantages to playing a game like *Persona*. A mix between visual novel and turn-based RPG, it didn't require my constant attention as he did. I could play one-handed. The fingers of my left hand moved between the buttons and the D-pad, while the fingers of my right traced the curve of his spine. *Persona* is long, and yet also a game you can dip in and out of at leisure. I could read in silence, strategise in peace, listen out for his needs, and equally become absorbed in the escapism.

Must Play

Originally released on the PlayStation 2 in 2008, *Persona 4* was met with exceptional review scores. The Vita port, *Persona 4 Golden*, released four years later in 2012 and was received even more positively, with added social links and story beats. Atlus have often released updated version of their *Persona* series, including *Persona 3 FES* and *Persona 5 Royal*.

The story of *Persona 4* was not so far removed from my reality. Years earlier I had worked in a high school in the Japanese countryside. I was personally familiar with precisely that surrounding. While the protagonist had been sent to the countryside from his family home, I had escaped there. It had been an unfamiliar world to me too, and one which I learnt to call home. I found mother figures in teachers I worked with, took solace in my friendships, and I battled with my identity. What exactly made me tick? The story of *Persona* was similar to my life, and yet not. I found my own life banal. I found *Persona* to be intriguing, fantastical, and adventurous.

Persona is a long game, but he lay in bed far longer. I finished it and picked up *Yomawari*, a horror game also set in the Japanese countryside, where you play a small girl shrouded in loneliness, engulfed in the darkness of her thoughts. The key to the sense of fear that *Yomawari* instils is the unknown. *Yomawari* has no music, no soundtrack at all. Instead, you listen to the increasing beats of your racing heart. Anything you see can be dealt with — managed — yet you can see so little. It is that which is unknown that is the most threatening. A motherless child who is still unsure of who she is, it was easy to draw these parallels too.

I wasn’t consciously choosing games I could relate to. I was choosing games which were considered Vita classics or that had cute box art. I knew very little about the Vita’s library. I had done almost no research about the console specifically. *Tearaway* catered to my love of platformers, and I took hideous pictures of myself to fill the place of the sun, and photographed the crack of my arse to use as a custom texture.

This was the first game he engaged with me in. First I showed him the funny faces I pulled, knowing his fondness for physical comedy. He’s an artist, and he appreciated the style and the comforting messages. The cosy vibe was something he clung to. It allowed him to converse. I think part of his indecision was fueled by my refusal to choose for him what he should do. While I had chosen to play the Vita as a solo activity through his lack of activity, it became cooperative.

However, like most of my efforts, the Vita was merely a bandaid. I picked up Drinkbox Studios’ incredible *Severed*, another story of a girl without a family. It gripped me instantly, and unlike the games I had played before it, it was very involved. *Severed* contains real-time combat. I blistered my fingers, swiping them frantically back and forth over the screen. I could not put the game down, and in fact, it was my first ever platinum. I did not play *Severed*, I immersed myself. As such, I shut off the world around me. I shut him out. He noticed.

As I have said, depression manifests in many forms, and my partner has extremely low self-worth. It didn’t matter how many times I affirmed him. I not only told him that I loved him, but I showed him through my actions and deeds. His opinion of himself was so low that he could not believe that I truly meant what I said. There are two conflicting ideals at work here. One is that he believed he was worthless and that when I realised I would leave. The other is that if I cared about a piece of crap like him, then my affections could land on any piece of crap I might find.

This is the mindset which led him to be jealous of my relationship with my Vita. That jealousy erupted when I played *Severed*. The arguments began. Apparently, I loved the Vita more than him.

While it was true that I played the Vita a lot, it was only a reflection of how long he spent silent in bed. I began playing

the Vita because he was catatonic. However, his head turned it around so that he was catatonic because I was always playing the Vita. It was one of those things, one of those pointless arguments which eventually passed with no outcome. He still lay there, and by the time the blisters on my fingers had healed, the bad feeling had passed enough that I could return to play.

I searched Twitter for games I’d never heard of. Within Vita groups, the name *Danganronpa* continued to recur. Simply by chance, I found an English copy for sale in my local second-hand otaku store and it began my infatuation with the series. *Danganronpa* is a game which offers the characters two paths: to be selfish, to let all others perish for your own preservation, or the possibility to work together with the hopes of everyone making it out alive. It is the story of the power of friendship. It was the beginning of me forming my own.

I had friends in Japan, but being with him meant I couldn’t be with my friends in real life. Outside of work I socialised with other Vita players online. We recommended games to each other. We played online. We traded Japanese releases for Western ones. We even gifted each other unwanted games for free. More so, we spilled secrets to each other. We told each other of our difficult pasts, of the problems we dealt with in the present. It turned out that we were all filling a hole inside of us. They were all different shapes, but we chose to fill them in the same way.

Wracked with the pain of the mother I never had, and the man I felt I had to care for, my secrets poured into the community. Their secrets poured back. The man who spent ten years living on his friend’s sofa, unable to motivate himself to find a job, but found the motivation to live with each game he completed. The woman who found out at the funeral of her partner that he was married to someone else for the decades they shared. She swore off relationships and threw herself into her hobby. These people, my people, were everywhere, with me.

This story has a happy ending. But not in the way you expect.

It was summer but the rain came down hot and heavy in droves. The city flooded and the mountains dripped into mudslides. Riverbanks broke with the swell, sweeping people away with the power. This was the week that Alec Holowka, one of the developers of *Night in the Woods*, died. More precisely the week he took his own life. It was in this month of unseasonable tragedy that I decided I could carry on no more.

I have tried to take my own life a number of times. While I felt I had kept myself together for the sake of him, the cracks were beginning to show. I was starting to realise that my life was not there to serve his. That wanting to live my life for me was not selfish. That I wasn’t going to help him if he wouldn’t help himself. That he would be fine without me, and that if he wasn’t that was neither my problem nor my fault. And so I left. It had taken me five years but I did. The community had given me the strength to do so.

Perhaps it is true that the Vita is so integral to my life because I have bonded with it through the trauma. In the way that I always turn to cigarettes in times of stress, the Vita is a constant in my life. Something which never causes me stress or anguish. My escapism. My motivation. My enjoyment. The Vita hasn’t filled that mother shaped hole, or that partner shaped hole either. It doesn’t have to. Nothing does.

It is ever there though. The stories inside are the lens through which I process my own history. That’s all it needs to be.



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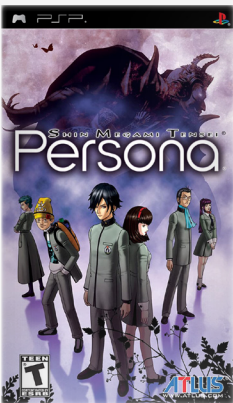
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Persona 4 Golden
[PlayStation Vita]
2012

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Persona 2: Innocent Sin
[PlayStation Portable]
2011



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276
Persona 3 Portable
[PlayStation Portable]
2009

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Persona
[PlayStation Portable]
2009

SHINE BRIGHT.

Released in 2011 in Japan and early 2012 for the rest of the globe, the PlayStation Vita is my favourite system of all time. It's not perfect, but it does allow my favourite games to be experienced on the go.

The Vita is a small handheld console that opens up the world of indie games like no other. I'm going to talk about a few of my favourites and a few that didn't make it onto the machine, but by god I wish they did.

Indie games on the Vita are put on a pedestal as its modest game library from larger studios, including Sony itself, was short-lived and sporadic at best. I genuinely don't know if I'd have ever played some of the smaller games such as *Rogue Aces*, *Curses 'n Chaos*, and *Severed*, if this console wasn't in my life, and that's just to name a few. *The Swindle*, *Pix The Cat*, *Retro City Rampage*... I could go on all day listing brilliant little indie games (and some bigger indie games) that I would have probably never experienced, but the point is that this console should have been pushed for its indie games. This is not to say the bigger budget games are bad (more on that later) but the smaller titles seem to really pack more of a punch.

So why did the Vita fail to set the world on fire? It was marketed with big blockbuster games such as *Uncharted* and *Killzone*. This was a mistake.

The limited hardware capabilities made these games feel like watered-down versions of their console counterparts. Indie games, however, are the full package. You get amazing games on the go and if this was marketed as such towards both developers and consumers then the Vita would have been in a much better place, in my humble opinion.

The lack of users led to limited development which, in turn, led to even less adoption from users, which led to less development, and so on. The Vita could have been a success, but instead it's just a brilliant little failure, filled to the brim with indie classics that shine brightly on it.

SPELUNKY

When I think of the Vita, I think of *Spelunky*. This game is perfect for this system and the Vita, in turn, is perfect for this game. It's fun, quick, makes full use of all the controls, and is just great to play. This is a prime example of the Vita allowing an indie game to shine. On PC, *Spelunky* is great; on the Vita, it's perfect. The screen displays all the action, from getting crushed by Olmec or managing to defeat King Yama; it all feels and looks magical — genuinely magical. It's hard to describe how fluid everything is on this console; the tight controls combined with the smaller, clearer screen allows the game to resonate in a way I've never really experienced on a larger screen. Not every game works better on a portable system, but *Spelunky* is my go-to example if I ever need one.

THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

Released in late 2014, the game was actually included in the PlayStation Plus picks for the month of its launch (at least here in the UK). This game is arguably the best

First Party Abandonment

Very few first-party PlayStation titles were created for the Vita, although what games there were tended to be well received. The final first-party game to be released on the console was 2014's *Freedom Wars*, which did especially well in Japan where it sold 188,888 physical copies in its first week — the second biggest release for the Vita in the region.

roguelike of all time, allowing for fun synergies of items, while the vast array of enemies make each run feel a little different. The way every attempt at beating the game is tracked, and each success recorded, allows you to fill out completion marks. Each completion expands Isaac's pool of enemies, items, rooms, and even entire levels. The result is more expansive and fun experience which I'd argue is the benchmark for all roguelikes. The Vita allows this beautiful game to come with you wherever you go, and an average run of *The Binding of Isaac* takes 20–40 minutes which is perfectly suited to the Vita's portability. I spent countless hours whilst waiting for my college classes to start grinding out completion marks and trying desperately to collect all the bandages needed for Bandage Girl so I could finally get the 100% needed for the 'Real Platinum God' Trophy, and I enjoyed every second of it.

The only issue is that the later DLC never made its way to the Vita. I have to assume this is either a business decision or it's limited by the hardware, but if it ever did make it over, I don't think I'd ever play *Isaac* on a different system again.

HOTLINE MIAMI

Who hasn't heard of the fast action and bloody mess of *Hotline Miami*? One of the best soundtracks of all time makes its way into your hands accompanied by short and punchy levels that work wonders on the Vita.

In *Hotline Miami* each level is like a small puzzle that you have to solve by quickly and efficiently butchering everyone on the floor. The levels end up feeling like a rhythm game as you get into the flow of gliding from one foe to the next, throwing weapons and smashing through doors all as the beats of *M.O.O.N.* pound through the speakers (or your headphones — you do you). *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* is also available on the Vita and whilst I think it's a good game, the level design, in comparison to its predecessor, has some frustrating choices which can lead to you getting killed from off-screen, causing much frustration. Whilst worth playing, the first game is definitely the superior of the two as it features smoother gameplay and a surprisingly interesting story.

DARKEST DUNGEON

Ruin has come to our family, but not to this superb little turn-based roguelike.

Darkest Dungeon is a stressful game, and a challenging foray into the world of dark fantasy RPGs. The experience is carried by its themes and narration. Every word spoken by the narrator cements a feeling of hopelessness, but it's in those hopeless moments that true joy can arise with just a single crit, virtuous turn, or successful escape. Finally, delving from Hamlet Deep through the Warrens and into the blood-drenched

passage to enter the final challenge is an experience unlike any other.

The game on the Vita works particularly well due to its structure allowing you to select the length of the mission (short, medium or long), whilst also allowing you to drop in and out every turn if needed. This game is remarkably easy to pick up and play, but a dedicated playthrough allows you to fully soak up the atmosphere of the estate.

Enemy design and, really, the art in general should be noted as being particularly top notch here, with the hand drawn characters popping with the animations and lighting changes accentuating each successful blow given or received.

PAPERS, PLEASE

Lucas Pope has a way of telling a story through games that rival some of the best pieces of media out there, created with a fraction of the budget. His art style is unique and memorable in both *Return of the Obra Dinn* and his breakout hit, *Papers, Please*.

Papers, Please sees you playing the role of a passport security agent during a fake war in a fake country, and yet makes it feel so goddamn real. The gameplay, focused on a small cluttered desk, works wonders with the Vita's touchscreen, allowing you to move letters and documents around freely, while fully immersing you into the war-torn world. Not every person is going to be memorable but those NPCs you meet with little stories and offhand comments can create some tough ethical dilemmas. No one who has played this game is going to forget Jorji any time soon, and I highly doubt that anyone remembers *Papers, Please* with anything except fond, if depressing, memories.

The game also features an endless mode. If the gameplay happens to leave you wanting more at the end of its 30 day story, it allows you to challenge your perception in order to reach new high scores.

The simplicity of *Papers, Please* led to such an impactful masterclass of gaming that I genuinely believe is a work of art that everyone should experience in some form or another.

Glory to Arstotzka.

OLLIOLLI2: WELCOME TO OLLIWOOD

OlliOlli2 is the best skateboarding game. *Tony Hawk* fans are going to kill me for that but I stand by it.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater is dumb, arcadey fun, *Skate* has a more intricate trick system and a large open world but *OlliOlli2: Welcome to Olliwood* is the most satisfying. Levels take minutes to beat and hours to master, but



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Rebirth Rears Its Head...

A physical Vita version of *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* was teased by publisher Nicalis in 2017, however it never appeared, and was thought to have been cancelled. However, in 2021 Twitter user @cyberpungelect! found a promo copy for sale in an American video game store for only \$16.99. There are many rumours surrounding this and other Nicalis released for Vita — an easy rabbit hole to fall down!



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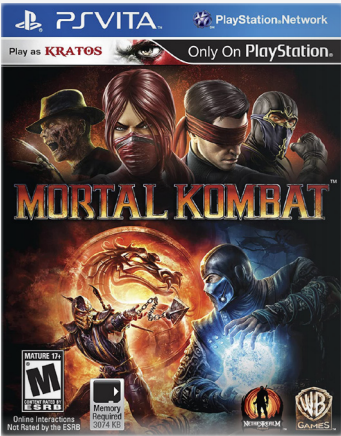
Hotline Miami: Collected Edition
2015

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The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth [Sample]
2021

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Spelunky: Collectors Edition
2019



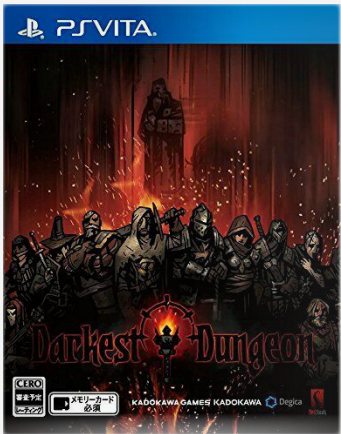
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282
Mortal Kombat
2012

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Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes
2012

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Papers, Please
2017

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Darkest Dungeon
2016

when you get that perfect run off and complete a whole level in a single combo it's so goddamn satisfying.

A simple control scheme, a simple idea and a simple game, but together, they make perfection — the feeling of improving ever so slightly from your last run and overcoming hurdles accompanied by the thought of “oh go on just one more attempt” make it ideal for on-the-go gaming. *OlliOlli2: Welcome to Olliwood* isn't a game you should just play, it's a game you should try your best to perfect, because that's where it really shines.

LEGO GAMES

Small, cute, and childish, but enough about me!

The *Lego* games are really good for on-the-go gaming. The visual humour works without needing to put in headphones or blast your speakers in public. The short and sweet levels allow for being able to drop the game if something comes up without losing too much progress.

The Vita hosts a bunch of *Lego* games including (but not limited to) the magic mischief of *Lego Harry Potter* and the legendary journey experienced in *Lego Lord of the Rings*. Personally, I think the series peaked with *Lego Marvel's Avengers*, although I do have a soft spot for *Lego Jurassic World* as its quick pacing felt like it was made for the Vita — albeit the length of the game may be disappointing for some.

MORTAL KOMBAT

Mortal Kombat (9, if you're still counting) is a soft reboot of the franchise and filled many of my days with quick bouts between Earthrealm and Outworld. A really solid entry in the series, the game retells the story of the first major arc of the *Mortal Kombat* universe and features a collection of twists and turns that are a joy to experience. The Ladder mode, in particular, shines on the Vita, allowing for a quick run through the classic (or klassic) *Mortal Kombat* experience without having to worry about paying attention to the story which, for my tastes, is better experienced on the big screen for the epic moments that this game features.

Unfortunately, the servers are long gone by this point so online play is unavailable, but don't let that stop you from enjoying the great kollection of playable kharacters including guests such as Kratos and Freddy Krueger, as well as returning favourites like Noob Saibot and Scorpion (Stryker also makes an appearance so, yeah, that happens).

The game also features a host of side modes and unlockables, plus hidden secrets within the Ladder mode too. Quite frankly the unlocks in this game feel much more rewarding to me than the later entries. The challenge modes make for a nice change of pace and are short,

allowing them to be good time wasters if you only have a few minutes to kill.

Sure, this isn't really an indie game, but I just had to include it. I really enjoyed this game and, if you've never played a *Mortal Kombat* game, I think this is the perfect jumping off point to get into the series. And remember, “He Must Win”.

Handheld gaming is brilliant, and the Vita is a prime example with a beautiful OLED screen (on the original unit anyway) and an amazing, albeit under-utilised, rear touchscreen. The dual sticks are also a major improvement in comparison to its predecessor, the PlayStation Portable.

I cherish mine and still play it to this day. With an abundance of brilliant games, the best version of *Spelunky* (the fact *Spelunky 2* didn't get a release is criminal) and even portable trophies, the Vita has cemented itself as my favourite system. I don't have space to cover all the games I love, not even close, but thanks for reading about ones I did have the time for. And play *Spelunky* on the Vita, it really is the best.

Ahead of its time in terms of screen quality and a unique dual touch screen, the Vita could have been the best handheld system on the market — the potential allowed for a unique control scheme that, in my opinion, was under-used: the only half decent implementation that comes to my mind is the *FIFA* series using it for a unique way of targeting your shots with more precision. I feel like some people far more creative than I could have come up with some unique control schemes and experiences if the Vita had been more commercially successful.

I wholeheartedly believe the framework for the best handheld console is here. Focusing on smaller games would have allowed Sony to better utilise the hardware that hampers this otherwise great console — AAA games are great, but this wasn't the place for them. This was the place for titles like *Rogue Legacy* and *Severed*, not *Call of Duty* or *Killzone*. I dream of a world where the Vita had the success it deserved, and we managed to get other hits on here such as *Blood Bowl*, *FTL*, and *Prison Architect*; they'd have been great on the go and perfect on the Vita.

Propped Up By Indies

The Vita was central to the 2010's indie gaming scene, with many developers and publishers releasing their games for the system that Sony effectively abandoned after 2014. Massive tentpole titles from the scene saw release for the console, including the likes of Fez, Super Meat Boy, Axiom Verge, Thomas Was Alone, Shovel Knight, Limbo and Bastion.

shine bright.

GRAVITY RUSH.

Gravity Rush is the kind of game we rarely get much of anymore. With the industry churning out multiplayer-focused battle royales and bloated sandboxes, it’s increasingly uncommon to see a developer deliver a stunning single-player action game of inimitable style and design, and yet that’s exactly what Sony’s now-defunct Japan Studio produced in *Gravity Rush* (known as *Gravity Daze* in Japan). Led by *Silent Hill* creator, Keiichiro Toyama, *Gravity Rush* was not what you’d expect from a person best known for the dark environments, shuffling monstrosities, and complicated antiheroes of *Silent Hill* and his subsequent effort, *Siren*.

Colourful and bearing a vibrant visual style not dissimilar to a Moebius graphic novel come to life, *Gravity Rush*’s lead character, Kat, has lost her memory (Japan loves its amnesiacs), but discovers that she can control gravity. Originally developed for PlayStation 3, this premise was eventually migrated over to the PlayStation Vita hardware as a showcase for its built-in features (particularly the gyroscope and touchscreen).

Impressively, *Gravity Rush* lets players send Kat flying — in floaty, *Hancock* style — all around its huge open world, beginning in the game’s stunningly detailed introductory city. She can fly over, through, and under it, revealing just how detailed and expansive the city is, right down to the interconnected sewer tunnels which Kat calls home. She’s less Superman and more suspended in space, which finds our hero hurtling through the sky with a dynamic sense of speed and momentum. While combat can be frustrating due to accuracy issues with gyroscope sensitivity, *Gravity Rush* still feels like the complete package, with every aspect of its fiction gelling neatly together. Even the pseudo-3D cutscenes of layered 2D comic art offer striking visual depth, moving with the Vita’s gyroscope. *Gravity Rush* was also one of the first titles to take advantage of the Vita’s ‘developer mode,’ which shut off all network features in exchange for extra processing cycles.

Because the game was only a modest success, Sony of America wasn’t keen to throw its support behind the game, and only reluctantly released the eventual PlayStation 4 port and its sequel, *Gravity Rush 2* in physical form in extremely limited quantities as retailer-specific exclusives. While Kat would also make an appearance in *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* on PS3 and Vita, with Japan Studio’s closure and Toyama moving on to found a new game studio, Bokeh Game Studio, it’s reasonable to assume that Kat’s wonderful, high-flying adventures have reached their conclusion. It’s unfortunate, really, as single-player games of this nature are less and less common these days, which is why the stellar original still stands as one of the Vita’s absolute must-own games.

LUMINES ELECTRONIC SYMPHONY.

When I was working as a producer on what would become *Lumines Electronic Symphony*, it originally began in concept as *Daft Punk Lumines*. The idea was to put the player in the role of the iconic French duo and play the game as viewed from within the pyramid-shaped DJ dome that Daft Punk had constructed for their *Human After All* tour. The idea was to create a purely electronic music-focused *Lumines* game for people’s PlayStation Vitas, to rehabilitate the series’ image after a series of lacklustre sequels and spin-offs following the release of *Lumines II* on PSP. The Xbox 360 version arrived at the start of the digital download era and was misinterpreted as a nickel-and-dime play when the reality was that it had to be able to fit on the console’s memory cards since it was not guaranteed that every consumer would have a 360 HDD.

Subsequent releases on PS2 and then mobile further diminished the brand, so *Electronic Symphony* (which it transformed into after Daft Punk were too busy to commit to the project) was the result of our concentrated effort to bring the game back to basics, and create the essential puzzle game for Vita. Although some bemoaned the loss of past modes like Puzzle Mode, our mandate was to basically remove anything that didn’t involve energetic, fast-paced block-dropping action.

While we allowed players to connect to the internet in order to upload a player’s contribution to the game’s World Block (a dynamic block that players would collectively chip away at to unlock weekly score bonuses), the game used the system’s ‘developer mode’ to access the Vita’s extra processing power when not spending cycles on staying connected to WiFi. We also utilised the Vita’s rear touchscreen in tandem with the new avatar mechanic to enable personalised power-ups in-game.

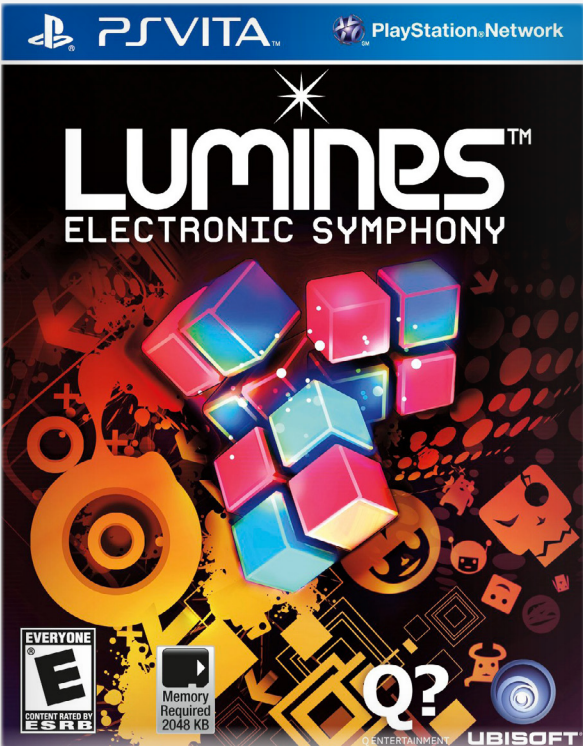
The soundtrack was another key component. We worked really closely with Ubisoft’s licensing team to return the series to an all-electronic music focus, including tracks from across the spectrum, with songs by The Art of Noise (the ‘80s) alongside tracks by ‘90s acid house stalwarts The Beloved and 808 State, all the way up through turn of the century bangers by The Chemical Brothers, Underworld, Amon Tobin, Faithless, Aphex Twin, and later contributions by Mark Ronson, Ken Ishii, Air, and more. Although Ubisoft contractually had the rights to port the game to other consoles, the eventual dissolution of the internal development teams at Q Entertainment meant that no such ports ever occurred, and with a soundtrack as top-tier as *Electronic Symphony*’s was, re-licensing everything at this point would simply be cost-prohibitive.

It’s a shame that this game is a true Vita exclusive, as *Electronic Symphony* once held the crown as the highest-rated original Vita game for the bulk of the console’s lifespan (although *Tearaway* may have eventually taken the mantle), and would have been wonderful to see on other platforms. As it is, some games burn brightly and never again, and the Vita is home to many of them, *Lumines Electronic Symphony* included.



286

286
Gravity Rush
2012



287

287
Lumines: Electronic Symphony
2012



288

288
Tearaway
2013



289

289
Wipeout 2048
2012

TEARAWAY.

If any game can, ten years after its original release, hold up as the pinnacle of the Vita's potential, it's Media Molecule's wonderfully inventive paper platformer *Tearaway*. 'Paper' in that the entire world and its characters are built as if from construction paper — which is so convincing you quickly forget you're looking at stylized 3D models — making *Tearaway* a sort of fully 3D equivalent of *Paper Mario*. But while *Paper Mario* was originally conceived as the successor to *Super Mario RPG*, *Tearaway* was born as a fully 3D adventure game from the outset.

Bursting with imagination and delightful surprises at every turn of its relatively short playtime — 7 hours or so for a full playthrough by average estimates — *Tearaway* proved that Media Molecule was more than just a one-trick pony with *Little Big Planet* (they'd continue to prove this again later with their stellar game-creator-within-a-game *Dreams*). Utilising every gimmick baked into the Vita hardware in truly inventive ways, *Tearaway* is an adventure game you want to show your friends and your friends' friends.

Fully embracing its visual milieu, *Tearaway*'s gameplay uses every bit of the Vita's capabilities to transform this into a sincerely magical platforming adventure made out of virtual paper. Using the camera, for instance, to take selfies which then appear in-game, texture-mapping your face on object surfaces in various spots scattered throughout the game environments, turning the player into a god-like being peering in on their paper creations, is but one stroke of brilliance. Using the rear touchscreen to manipulate the ground's surface in-game is another, sending characters hurtling into the air, or poking polygonal fingers through the construction paper to interact with the game using the Vita's rear input method. *Tearaway*'s continuously inspired use of the Vita's gimmicks made figuring out how to navigate the game's beautifully balanced levels a sublime platforming experience, pairing the near-constant discovery of ingenious game design with excellent pacing and a not-too-difficult learning curve.

Unfortunately, the Vita's relatively short lifespan combined with Media Molecule's focus on the *Little Big Planet* series meant that a true *Tearaway* sequel was not in the cards. While a remastered version, *Tearaway Unfolded*, later manifested on PlayStation 4 (co-developed by Media Molecule and *Little Nightmares* developer, Tarsier Studios) it was a commercial failure, all but ensuring the end of the brilliant but short-lived franchise.

That said, *Tearaway* is a masterclass in game design innovation, and Media Molecule packed more fresh ideas in this game than most *Mario* games do in a decade. While some might take that as a slight against *Mario*'s sublime refinements in each sequel, it's more a testimony to how bursting at the seams *Tearaway* is with character in both game design and its tiny paper people. To own a Vita and not own *Tearaway* would be to miss the point of Vita ownership entirely. It is the little-known, under-appreciated platforming classic that time forgot.

WIPEOUT 2048.

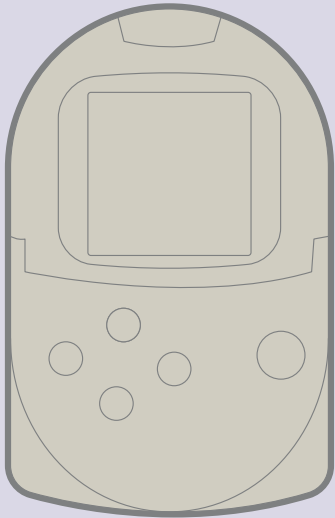
Psygnosis is dead. Long live Psygnosis! The famed UK-based development team has existed in one form or another since 1984, making its name with vintage games like *Shadow of the Beast* (the game and company's logo were both designed by legendary Yes album cover/logo artist, Roger Dean) before rising to prominence in the mid-90s with its *Wipeout* series of anti-gravity racers. Prettier than Nintendo's similar *F-Zero* franchise by some distance, and possessed of some of the best soundtracks in gaming history, *Wipeout* put Psygnosis on everyone's map. In 2000, Psygnosis was absorbed into Sony Computer Entertainment and rebranded as Studio Liverpool. The frequency of *Wipeout* releases would slow, although the studio released the highly regarded *Wipeout Pure* and then *Pulse* for PlayStation Portable in 2005 and 2007, respectively.

Chronologically and conceptually speaking, *Wipeout 2048* is the prequel to the original *Wipeout* on PlayStation (and, of course, *Wipeout 2097*), pitting racers on urban street environments, and not the dedicated anti-gravity race tracks of the 'later' games (according to *Wipeout* lore, the F3600 anti-gravity racing league was only formed in 2052). As the final game developed by Studio Liverpool (2017's *Wipeout Omega Collection* was developed by a collection of studios), *Wipeout 2048* at least goes out with a bang. Fan favourite ship manufacturers Feiser, AG Systems, Auricom, Qirex, and Piranha are all present in the year of 2048, although their loadouts are understandably more primitive than their later counterparts (no Shockwave for example).

Developed in tandem with the Vita (along with the PlayStation 3 release *Wipeout HD*) *Wipeout 2048* may not be the most original title in the handheld's launch line-up, but it still takes advantage of the majority of the system's built-in features — gyroscope, touchscreen, internet connectivity, etc. *2048* even supported crossplay with *Wipeout HD*, making it one of the only Vita games to offer such cross-functionality with the PS3 outside of Remote Play purposes.

In terms of originality, *Wipeout 2048*'s reputation isn't based on the game reinventing the wheel. It made its name as a stellar example of a sequel in a long-running series simply crushing it on its target platform in nearly every aspect of its presentation. *2048* would surely have made a bigger splash were the Vita itself a more popular concern, but as it stands Sony's handheld is the place to be for all manner of anti-gravity-based games (*Gravity Rush* being the other one).

Whether *Wipeout* itself resurfaces again — courtesy of *Omega Collection*'s trio of developers, XDev, Clever Beans, and Creative Vault Studios, or otherwise — depends on whether rumours of an imminent *Wipeout* revival are true or not. Regardless, if you own a Vita, you owe it to yourself to make this gorgeous, lightning-fast racer a permanent part of your library.



PocketStation	
Manufacturer	Sony PlayStation
CPU	ARM7T (32-bit RISC chip)
Display	32×32 dot monochrome LCD
Price	JP ¥2,000

The Sony PocketStation, which was released exclusively in Japan in 1999, was an odd handheld — it was produced for the primary reason of being an accessory for the PlayStation 1, and to enhance the overall gaming experience. Although it’s classed as a handheld, it’s actually designed specifically to pair with a PlayStation console, much like the Visual Memory Unit for the Sega Dreamcast.

Sony was attempting to bridge the gap between its ubiquitous Memory Card and a personal digital assistant, giving it an LCD display, a handful of buttons, infrared technology, and a built-in real-time clock. Because the device connects to your PlayStation 1 (and 2, thanks to backwards compatibility) via the memory card slot, Sony produced a ‘door’ on the front of the PocketStation which transforms (similar to the Transformer toys, actually) into a memory card after opening it.

By simply plugging it into your PlayStation you could download game files to it, should you want to transport them around to play on a friend's PlayStation, and you could also download minigames, if you just so happen to have the games that use this feature. For example, the PocketStation is compatible with over 200 games, such as *Spyro The Dragon*, *Crash Bandicoot 3: Warped*, *Final Fantasy VIII*, *Metal Gear Solid*, and many more.

In *Final Fantasy VIII*, the mini-game playable on the PocketStation was called *Chocobo World*. In this simple game, a tiny Chocobo called Chicobo strides through a vast world battling enemies, making allies, and collecting items. Allies and items found in *Chocobo World* can then be transferred and used in the main game, making it a must-have accessory for those who like to grind at games when away from their console. It helped gamers have a competitive advantage to complete games faster, in hopes that boasting about it to their friends made them cool.

Another game that had some interesting features within the handheld was *Street Fighter Zero 3*. In its mini-game you could take your favourite fighters with you in sprite form. When you had some free time, you could fight other sprites on the tiny screen to increase your level and collect upgrades. Once you are finished grinding in the back of the car on that long road trip, you could then plug it into your PlayStation at home and transfer the experience points to your characters there, making them even more powerful than before you left.

This feature in itself made it feel like you were missing out if you didn’t have a PocketStation, and if I had to guess, this emotion alone was one of the main reasons why the PocketStation sold so well in Japan. Children didn’t want their friends to have more powerful fighters! They didn’t want them trading items while they were stuck force feeding their *Tamagotchi* another hotdog, oh no! It was time they invested in a PocketStation and let their *Tamagotchi* fend for themselves for once! Oh, wait...

Sony had plans to eventually release the PocketStation to the rest of the world, and even went as far as advertising it across North America and Europe, but due to manufacturing issues they decided to keep it as a Japanese exclusive. It was so popular in the country that Sony

sold over 5 million units within the device's three-year lifespan, making it an irrefutable success — selling only slightly less than the Vita sold over its nine-year lifespan in the region. Gamers had the choice of snagging a white or fully transparent variant when it was on sale, and it retailed for around ¥3,000, making it an affordable accessory for everyone.

Sony’s plan to compete with Sega’s Dreamcast VMU and Nintendo’s Pokémon Mini was a success. The rise of the mini consoles during this time helped push sales towards their main consoles, and reeled in gamers that wanted to buy games specifically for the PocketStation features.

Admittedly, the battery life of these smaller consoles were all over the place, and at times very unreliable, but it was the gaming companies' way of keeping the gamer within their bubble. They could grind, collect, battle and trade on the go, all while edging their game completion percentage forward.

These mini consoles certainly gave large companies like Sony a taste for what would become a massive demand for handheld consoles in the coming years. Did the PocketStation change the handheld industry? Probably not. Did it help push it along? Absolutely.



A Pocket In Your Pocket

In 2013, Japanese Vita players were given the ability to play PocketStation games via the PocketStation for PlayStation Vita app. This allowed you to load up PocketStation minigames from any PSone classics you had on the system and play to your heart's content. The app never made it to the West, unfortunately.



SEGA GAME GEAR.

First Released:
1990

Manufacturer:
Sega

Launch Price:
JP ¥19,800
US \$149.99
UK £99.99

If ever there was a system that could take on Nintendo's sheer dominance of the handheld market in the early '90s, it would have been Sega's bulky grey battery muncher, the Game Gear.

Sporting a large, friendly frame and a full-colour screen, to the casual person the Game Gear was like night and day in comparison to the Game Boy. Why on Earth would you want to strain your eyes with a non-backlit, spinach green display, when you could lavish your peepers with a glorious 4096 colour display that you could play in the dark? Or even watch actual television on, if you were fortunate enough to also possess the TV tuner attachment?

Who cared if it had the battery life of a gnat picking the incorrect holy grail, and was a messy blur the second any large movement happened? This was the future of handheld gaming, the future in the palm of your very own hands! (Well, ignoring the fact the superior Atari Lynx also existed at the time, but, eugh, that was an 'Atari', the company that made that console your grandad played!)

However, when news reports first appeared of the Game Gear's existence (dubbed then as the 'Sega Microdrive') no-one seemed to know what it actually was. Magazines like CVG's Complete Guide to Consoles reported that it could play modified Mega Drive cartridges upon their first viewing at the Las Vegas Computer Entertainment Show, and Sega themselves didn't exactly help the situation, considering the Japanese packaging for the system was laden with games not only never released on the system, but also screenshotted from Mega Drive ports, such as Michael Jackson's Moonwalker and CyberBall 2072.

Come the Japanese launch in October 1990, however, the world would finally see the machine in all its tiny(ish) glory.

Now, call it rushed development or a hyper-focused target audience, but Japanese launch titles for consoles and handhelds have never really set the world alight with their choice of releases. Usually there's one game you're possibly interested in, and then

some incomprehensible Kanji-heavy Shogi or Mahjong derivatives, completely alien to us English speaking fellows, and the Game Gear was no exception.

The Japanese were bestowed with Pengo, a port of a then eight-year-old arcade game where you have to shove ice cubes inside a maze arena to crush the enemies on screen, alongside Formula 1 arcade racer Super Monaco GP. While obviously not even remotely close in comparison to the super scaler arcade original released the year prior (and visually more akin to Namco's Pole Position), it looked more like a Sega Master System game — something I'll go into later.

The other glaring omission from the Japanese launch line up was the lack of any puzzle games. Considering Nintendo's success in the handheld market was largely due to them bundling the Game Boy with Tetris, Sega releasing nothing similar with theirs was a huge oversight.

Obviously, Sega couldn't release Tetris for the Game Gear too, as evidenced by them infamously recalling the Mega Drive version just days after release when they realised that they didn't own the licensing rights. However, they did own jewel-stacking puzzler Columns, a title they would eventually release a few weeks later.

Sega of America thankfully had the foresight to bundle Columns for free with the US launch of the Game Gear, whereas Sega Europe decided to bundle the Game Gear with nothing. You want Columns? Then go buy it yourself.

For the Game Gear's first year in Japan, only a few more titles trickled in, such as: Wonder Boy, G-LOC: Air Battle and Dragon Crystal (all three also Master System releases), Shanghai II, Taisen Mahjong HaoPai (told you there's always bloomin' Mahjong games at launch), and box shovelling puzzler Sokoban, another title that seems to be legally required on every Japanese system.

The US wouldn't see the launch of the Game Gear in their territory until April 1991. However, over here in the UK, we wouldn't get out mitts on one for nearly another three months at the end of June.

Accessorise

The Game Gear had a few snappily titled accessories, like the Car Gear, the Super Wide Gear, and the Gear To Gear Cable. They do exactly what you'd expect them to!

GAME GEAR CONSOLE VARIATIONS

With its landscape form factor and bountiful curves, the Game Gear is no slouch in the looks department. Here are a few different variations released over the years for you to feast your eyes on.



290



291



292



293

290
Red
1992

292
Blue
1992

291
Yellow
1992

293
White [Developer Exclusive]
1992

I vividly remember travelling all the way to St. Albans to a store called Software First to grab mine. I did own a Japanese Mega Drive that I had bought from the same store the year prior, but for some reason I decided to wait for the official release of the Game Gear here. On the plus side, having the system launch later than other regions meant we had a far better selection of launch titles, and I picked mine up with *Mickey Mouse: Castle of Illusion* and *Shinobi*. I kinda lucked out with those two, as they were (and still are) considered killer titles for the system.

Strangely, I can't recall buying any other games for the Game Gear until years later. I possibly bought *Super Monaco GP* — mainly as my brother, Shaun, was a big fan of racing games — and a copy of *Putt and Putter* from a car boot sale years later, but I think my total lack of Game Gear game purchases entirely stems down to me also picking up a Master Gear converter early on. I had a rather extensive Master System collection by then, and with Master System game prices falling due to Sega's focus on the Mega Drive, it was just far cheaper to either play what I already owned, or buy the Master System version of a Game Gear game.

Hindsight does make me wonder if Sega should have employed what NEC had done with the PC Engine GT/Turbo-Express, and rather than create its own arbitrary line of games for the system, just had a Master System cartridge port in the back outright, by proxy extending the life of the Master System itself while also offering a handheld option to consumers. It is something Sega would do with the Sega Nomad a few years later, but one does wonder, considering how architecturally similar the Game Gear is to the Master System, whether that plan was in the cards at some point.

The Game Gear did have some other shortcomings too, most notably the battery life. Six AA batteries would award you a paltry four hours of gameplay — and that's if you had the volume turned down. You could stretch it to six if you were prepared to buy a pack of Sega's own-brand batteries, but unless you were lugging around a wall charger with you, then you'd better pray you had a short game, or one that had passwords. There were alternate options, such as a pretty bulky power pack adapter that you had to essentially screw into the back of the Game Gear due to its huge size, but considering the Game Gear could barely fit into your pocket to begin with, if you were carrying that around on top you'd probably end up on certain offender registers from the way you might look!

What the Game Gear lacked in power economy, it more than made up for in other add-ons. As previously mentioned, the Master Gear adapter, allowing you to play all cartridge based Master System titles on the system was one such device; though curiously, was never an official Sega product. However, the icing on the cake had to be the additional TV tuner. Having a portable television that could just about fit in your pocket was like witchcraft in the early '90s. As long as you weren't in a valley, in a tunnel, near a hospital, or near someone carrying a large amount of aluminium foil, the joy of watching any of the whopping four television channels we had in the UK at the time, anytime and anywhere, really felt like you were living in the future.



294



295

294
Sega Game Gear [JP]
1990

295
Coca-Cola Console
1994



It’s completely useless today now that analogue signals have long been shut down, but at least Sega had the foresight of having a ‘signal in’ port, so with a bit of jiggery-pokery, you can attach a device and watch Netflix or game with your current gen console. No idea why you’d actually want to do that, but at least the option is open for you!

Although seeing competition from two other handheld systems at the time — the Atari Lynx and the PC Engine GT/TurboExpress (three if you were gullible enough to believe British gaming TV show Bad Influence and their overly enthusiastic hype for the Quickshot/Wataru Supervision) — Sega’s Game Gear was the only system to really give Nintendo’s dominance with the Game Boy a true run for its money, most likely due to all that lovely Mega Drive/Genesis popularity money flowing into their pockets to keep up with promotion. Yes, the Game Gear only sold 10.6 million units as compared to Nintendo’s 118.69 million — though those numbers may include the machine’s resurrection with the mass popularity of *Pokémon* and sales of its pseudo-successor, the Game Boy Color — but the Game Gear’s popularity stood as the highest selling non-Nintendo handheld all the way up until the Sony PSP in 2004.

Curiously, despite Sega seeing the writing on the wall and cancelling all production of the Game Gear and its software in 1997, this wouldn’t be the end of the system. Three years later in 2000, American publisher Majesco Sales Inc. resurrected the handheld in the US. Majesco were known for grabbing the rights to products on their deathbed, manufacturing new units in Mexico on the cheap, and re-releasing white label versions in America. Until Electronic Arts were renowned for turning off a system’s lights with various *FIFA* releases as their final games, Majesco titles were the concluding releases on consoles, with titles

such as *Frogger* for both the Super Nintendo and Mega Drive/Genesis.

As Majesco produced their own product and didn’t rely on ‘new old’ stock, their version of the Game Gear was arguably superior to Sega’s original, sporting a slightly better battery life, a clearer (less blurry) LCD screen, and, despite the marked improvements in hardware, they also managed to release the new Game Gear at just \$30. The two versions of the system can easily be identified as Majesco’s version of the Game Gear’s logo is entirely in grey, whereas Sega’s original sports the iconic red, blue, and green ovals. They’re rarer than hen’s teeth outside of the US, but Majesco’s revision is definitely a recommended item for any Game Gear collector out there.

Even today, the Game Gear lives on! Out of all the handheld systems ever released, Sega’s grey-ish black bundle of joy was the first portable system to receive the ‘mini console’ treatment in 2020 with the Japanese-exclusive Game Gear Micro. It arrived in a choice of four colours, each containing four games, with a later fifth bundled with the *Aleste Collection* for Nintendo Switch.

I may have come across as rather negative about the Game Gear, but it was genuinely a great product. I absolutely adored mine as a kid. Yes, it never received the outstanding praise and popularity of the Game Boy — heck, the highest grossing game on the system, *Sonic 2*, only sold 240,000 copies globally — but looking back in hindsight, Sega really had created something magical.

With the huge modding community behind it today — replacing what it had with modern, more reliable capacitors, a better backlight, lithium-ion batteries and far clearer screens — it is finally getting the recognition it so rightfully is worthy of.

The Planets

Game Gear was code-named Project Mercury when in development. An early version of the Nomad was named Venus. Mars was the code-name for the 32X. Jupiter was the name given to Sega’s first cartridge-based concept for a 32-bit console that became the Sega Saturn. Neptune was the code-name for an in-development 32/Mega Drive combo unit. Pluto was the name given to a prototype Saturn with a built-in NetLink modem — likely scrapped due to the development of the 128-bit Dreamcast. Earth and Uranus went unused.



296
Panzer Dragoon Mini [JP exclusive Kid’s Gear line]
1996

297
Sonic Drift Bundle
1994

298
Coca Cola
1994

300
Ninku Blue
1995

299
Magic Knight Rayearth
1994

301
Majesco Game Gear
2001

GAME GEAR CARTRIDGE

Much like the Game Boy and almost all cartridge-based consoles at the time, the Game Gear used ROM carts to store its games. One of their biggest benefits is the speed with which they load content.

Jet Set Lifestyle

The Mega Jet was originally created for use on Japan Airlines flights. Gamers could rent a unit to plug into the screen at their seat and play a selection of Mega Drive games. An Alpine branded version also exists, which could be used in their cars. Sega eventually released the system commercially in Japan, though it required an AC adaptor and a screen... Not the most practical handheld!



302
Sonic Drift
1994

304
Coca-Cola Kid
1994

303
Sonic Labyrinth
1995

305
Ninku
1995

306
Sonic 2 Bundle
1992

308
Special Pack
1992

307
Mega Jet
1994

309
Sonic 2 Bundle [Back]
1992

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

To celebrate their 60th anniversary in 2022, Sega released a Game Gear Micro in Japan. This tiny device measured just 8 x 4.3cm, and came in black, blue, yellow and red. Each console had a set of four games, with one being dedicated almost entirely to the Shining Force franchise.



310



311



313



312



314



315

- 310
Micro Black
2020
- 312
Micro White [with Big Window]
2020
- 314
Micro Yellow
2020

- 311
Micro Blue
2020
- 313
Micro Red
2020
- 315
Micro Clear Black
2020

GOLDEN BOY.

Nix Nack

The triple trouble of the title refers to Doctor Robotnik, Knuckles and Nack the Weasel. Nack, named Fang the Sniper in Japan and future releases, also appeared in Sonic Drift 2, Sonic the Fighters, and Sonic Mania.



Sonic the Hedgehog: Triple Trouble
[Game Gear]
1994



It’s hard to overestimate the cultural impact of *Sonic the Hedgehog* in the ‘90s. During my childhood especially, the United Kingdom and my little corner of England were obsessed with the Blue Blur. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my SNES and *Super Mario World*, but I fell hook, line, and sinker for Sonic’s edgy attitude. 6-year-old Nathan ate up that schtick, and that ‘Blast Processing’ working behind the scenes of the Mega Drive games made them feel like nothing else I had played before. Ah, the power of marketing!

Where Mario waddled and jumped, Sonic went searingly quick through loops, jumped high into the air, and used his incredible flame and lightning powers to annihilate the evil forces of Dr. Robotnik. Time has been kinder to Mario, but *Sonic* presented what my adolescent mind considered a much cooler experience and, in hindsight, I’m grateful I was a Sonic fan first because he’ll always hold a special place in my heart. I’m never throwing away my Sonic skateboard, pencil case, lunch box, and all the rest...

Now, I don’t know if you’ve ever been truly obsessed with something as a kid, but if so you’ll know that you want to devour every piece of content associated with it. This was exacerbated by me being a weird child who just wanted to play video games and struggled making friends, so luckily my tired parents happily facilitated my newfound fascination, and once I had devoured the Mega Drive games I was interested in, I started badgering them for a Game Gear. I knew I loved my Game Boy and was addicted to *Pokémon*, and now you’re telling me that Sega had made their own handheld that had *Sonic* games on it?! My little brain couldn’t contain its excitement.

This is another area where I’m thankful I have my rose-tinted glasses because I can wholeheartedly speak about the things I adore from these miniature adventures. ‘90s Sega was so preoccupied with if they could, that they never considered if they should. That’s not to say these games are bad, far from it, I just wish they weren’t held back by the limits of the Game Gear. A smattering of interesting *Sonic* titles here, that clearly diverge from the Mega Drive entries, are flashes of brilliance too often held back by a tiny screen and poor processing power. While Nintendo was happy to make great Game Boy games, Sega wanted to make portable Mega Drive titles, and some were all the worse for it.

Would you care to guess how many games exist simply called *Sonic the Hedgehog*? Well add another one to whatever number you conjured, thanks to the Game Gear title *Sonic The Hedgehog* from 1991. So much of Sega’s output at the time was a direct reaction to Nintendo — Sonic was the answer to Mario, the Mega Drive was the answer to the SNES, and the Game Gear was the answer to the Game Boy. They barely even tried to change the name and hide it. After releasing the Game Gear in 1990, Sega put a young composer and developer called Yuzo Koshiro to work on adapting the speedster for the portable platform.

In hindsight, it’s pretty clear that the Game Gear couldn’t handle a game anywhere near its console counterpart, instead shifting to a slower-paced game that was more about platforming then speeding around. Similarly, the screen meant that action was cramped, and in the original *Sonic the Hedgehog* for Game Gear, the titular Hog took up most of the screen. The game was brutally tough in so many ways, with the reduced screen space meaning that platforming was essentially a guessing game. You either learnt these levels by heart, or you had to have the reflexes of Sonic himself. But the Blue Blur also had a little floatiness to him, and a slippery movement when on the ground that made things a little more finicky than you’d hope.

Hardware limitations aside, Yuzu Koshiro and his team over at Ancient (which allegedly included some of his own family members) put a lot of



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Sonic Drift
[Game Gear]
1994

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Sonic the Hedgehog
[Mega Drive]
2009

passion into this version of the game. After all these years, that passion makes this Game Gear title worth playing just to see what they achieved. The worlds remained bright and colourful, and a neat touch I always enjoyed was actually finding the Chaos Emeralds hidden in levels. They clearly couldn’t program bonus stages, but I really enjoyed this compromise. It also features a stellar soundtrack full of energy and mostly composed of original music by Koshiro himself, so this is a piece of history still worth a look for any fan.

Sonic the Hedgehog 2 for the Game Gear is where things start to really shift. Now in the hands of a development studio called Aspect, they clearly wanted to further separate themselves from the mainline entries, so this game is full of big swings. It also features the first appearance of Tails in a game (releasing mere days ahead of the home console title *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*), though you can’t play as them sadly. When looking at the box art of *Sonic 2* you’ll see Sonic floating on a colourful hang glider, a sign of the new mechanics to come. With the hang glider, minecarts, floating underwater bubble levels, and a few more gimmicks, *Sonic 2* really tried to do something different.

Sadly it was too much for my young brain, and is responsible for one of my greatest moments of shame in video games. While I could blister through *Sonic 1* with Knuckles on the Mega Drive, *Sonic 2* on the Game Gear was my dirty little secret. Thanks to its lack of a manual, and the tiny screen meaning navigating levels was ridiculously tough, I had gotten stuck. On the very first level with a hang glider I just couldn’t figure out the controls, wobbling like a maniac in the air and sending Sonic plummeting to his death, for months. I am not kidding when I say I was stuck on this level for, at a conservative estimate, a year. However, my older brother Dan smugly decided to have a go one day, figured it out instantly, and completed the level for me in under a minute. I mean, I am very grateful that I finally got to play more of that game, but try telling that to an angry child filled with white hot jealousy. Now you know my ultimate shame, and I blame *Sonic 2*.

Outside of this, *Sonic 2* sadly didn’t do much different to *Sonic 1*, and, gimmicks aside, is probably the most forgettable entry on the Game Gear — though the music is again the highlight.

Next up was *Sonic Chaos*, once again tackled by Aspect, and finally the development was catching up to the team’s ambition. Here Sonic no longer fills the entirety of the screen, and the platforming feels much more forgiving. *Sonic Chaos* also introduces loops to the handheld games, bringing players closer to the quintessential feeling of *Sonic*. The Blue Blur could also now don some exciting rocket-powered boots, and stages like Mecha Green Hill Zone showed that Sega and the development team were starting to have fun with the *Sonic* formula. In *Sonic Chaos* you could also finally play as Tails, and with his flying mechanic, this game could actually, feasibly, be completed by a child.

In 1994 came *Sonic the Hedgehog: Triple Trouble*, the first *Sonic* game for the Game Gear that didn’t arrive on

the Master System as well. At this point it felt like Aspect was really having fun with the system. Capitalising on the success of *Sonic 3*, Knuckles makes his appearance here, somehow tricked by Dr. Robotnik once again. I don’t know how, and it doesn’t matter. *Sonic Triple Trouble* also sees the introduction of Nack the Weasel, a forgotten part of *Sonic*’s history somewhat, and an omen of the plentiful characters the series would introduce in every entry going forward.

Eventually Sega and developer Aspect started really pushing for something different, and in 1995 came *Tails Adventure*, a charming platformer jaunt that starts out with a forest consumed in pillars of fire. Seriously, the first level is just towering infernos consuming the natural habitat of countless enemies, but that is a bit of a recurring theme in *Sonic* games. *Tails Adventure* gives our favourite fox their own game, and despite the fact I’m fairly sure they had super speed in previous games, here they saunter at a jovial pace through levels, aided by their signature flying technique and the occasional usable item.

Miles ‘Tails’ Prower sets off on their own escapade, utilising Tails’ items and some revisitable levels to create a game not far from early *Metroid* titles. But this slow gameplay fits Tails perfectly, as well as the Game Gear. Aspect had finally stopped trying to make a game as quick as the Mega Drive entries, and used Tails to do their own thing — and it’s fantastic. Tails also takes up an appropriate amount of the screen, and the calmer speed means this is a really neat little handheld experience.

Tails’ arsenal includes bombs to break walls, a hammer, and a helmet among other things, though you will have to physically walk out of the levels and then back to Tails’ house to organise them. It’s a needless bit of padding we wouldn’t see nowadays, but it does little to take away from the charm. Tails gets to explore both the land and the sea as he acquires a little ship that’s also a submarine, and one that you can also equip with missiles once you’ve found them. Tails even finds and commands a remote control robot that can squeeze through gaps and explore, which any fans of *Axiom Verge* may find a little familiar.

It’s over in a couple of hours if you know what you’re doing, but *Tails Adventure* is packed with clever levels, some breezy platforming, and just a treasure trove of interesting items for Tails to discover and put to good use. Oddly enough, for me personally the perfect *Sonic* game for the Game Gear doesn’t even include the Hog, as *Tails Adventure* works at its own pace, and builds a game cleverly around the hardware limitations that also fits with Tails’ personality and moves. If I could recommend one Game Gear game to people, I’d say to track this down and give it a go. Who knows, maybe Sega would actually make a sequel then.

But we’re far from finished, as Sega saw fit to bring a huge amount of *Sonic* games to the Game Gear, more than they even brought to the Mega Drive, in fact. A slightly utilitarian version of *Dr. Robotnik’s Mean Bean Machine* made its way over, though it doesn’t feel compromised in gameplay, and I always feel that puzzle games work better

in handheld. It's no *Columns*, but I'll take *Puyo Puyo* in any form I can get. In the same vein is a Game Gear version of *Sonic Spinball* that sadly doesn't deserve much of a mention. Just play the Mega Drive version.

Sonic Drift 2 is a sequel to *Sonic Drift*, otherwise known as Sega's answer to *Mario Kart*. This diminutive sequel attempts to smash a full kart racer onto the Game Gear, and it really does try, bless it. You can play as Sonic and pals, along with some weirder picks like Metal Sonic, Eggman, and Fang. The issue here is that the screen is chopped into two, with the bottom half showing the action, and the top showing the map. This makes the draw distance so short that you've no hope of seeing anything unless you just stare at the map to see when turns are coming. It can still be a bit of fun, and it's got a great colourful art style, but it doesn't feel like the smartest use of the Game Gear's strengths.

Also worth mentioning is *Sonic Labyrinth*, an isometric take on the *Sonic* formula that was developed by Minato Giken and released to middling reviews in 1995. Sonic was much more slower moving than he had been in previous titles, although this was ostensibly due to the fact that Dr. Robotnik tricked him into wearing different shoes. You'd think Sonic would be a little less gullible by now. At the time of writing, it's available on the 3DS, and has also featured in at least one *Sonic* compilation title from the sixth generation, so if you fancied giving it a go but don't own a Game Gear, there are options!

The final title of note is a weird oddity called *Sonic Blast*. Another 2D platformer, but this time Sonic and Knuckles are the playable heroes, and are brought to life with uncanny pre-rendered graphics reminiscent of *Donkey Kong Country*. It loses so much of the charm of the classic *Sonic* sprites (which are a work of art), and it feels more unsettling than anything else. The levels are also painfully slow, which is a shame because Sonic has his spin dash here, loops are back, and there's a good sense of momentum. A great *Sonic* feel is wasted on a strange game, but it's so odd that it's worth a look still.

As a kid, the Game Gear was my little secret. I had been such an unbearably loud *Sonic* fan that my parents relented, and given the limited impact of the Game Gear in the UK, I was the only one I knew who owned one. Sega really tried to make something happen here, and the unrelenting charm of Sonic and the passion of the developers means there are a handful of endearing and somewhat forgotten *Sonic* games that many fans would enjoy. Sega always did reach just beyond their grasp, but just like the Dreamcast, it's the sheer zeal and ingenuity behind these games that will define this console in the annals of history, not its apparent failures. Meanwhile, somewhere in Bristol for a sizable chunk of the 1990s, a lonely young boy who adored *Sonic* more than anything found a few more ways to play with the Blue Blur. I'll cherish those memories forever.

Like A G

G Sonic is actually the Japanese name for Sonic Blast, released in the country via Sega's Kid's Gear line. It was published in Brazil by the team at TecToy!



Sky Fox

Tails Adventure wasn't Miles' only outing on the Game Gear. The flying fox also starred in Tails' Skypatrol, a horizontal scrolling shooter developed by Japan System House and SIMS. This was initially developed for an unreleased handheld and featured original characters, but was changed to feature Tails when released by Sega.

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Tails Adventure [Game Gear]
1995

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Sonic Labyrinth [Game Gear]
1995

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Sonic Advance [Game Boy Advance]
2001



WHY DID WE FIX A GAME GEAR?

Every Sega Game Gear is a ticking time bomb.

True, the same can be said of many older consoles. These things we love are temporal collections of finite parts not designed to work forever. But the Game Gear is a special case, as it has a guaranteed and documented rate of failure that's significantly higher than many other systems — especially handhelds. After enough time, the capacitors on your Game Gear will leak, and it will die. This is inevitable. Knowing that, why flirt with disaster?

I asked myself the same question when I bought a broken Game Gear from eBay. Originally released in 1990, three years pre-Madeline, I didn't have any childhood attachment to the console. My own 'handheld history' was Game Boy, Game Boy Advance, DS... I reckon you can piece together the rest. Unlike my girlfriend, awash with warm memories of *Sonic* and *Streets of Rage 2*, the Game Gear hadn't etched a place in my heart yet.

Not as a physical object, anyway. At the heart of my desire for the system were cosy teenage memories, hunched in front of Kega Fusion with 3 am Chinese delivery on my lap. When I got my first real PC in my sophomore year of high school, I filled the hard drive with ROM dumps of long-dead systems — systems I always pined after but never got to touch. With a mouse, keyboard, and internet connection, I could get and play anything I'd ever wanted without spending a dime. And being a lifelong Sega junkie, the Game Gear was the most appealing system to dig into when I wasn't sifting through shmups and beat 'em ups on MAME. It was the natural choice to hyper-fixate on, because it was the handheld Sega childhood I never got to have.

Now, with this broken unit, I would get to capture that impossible childhood in my late 20s. After all, transitioning is basically a second girlhood, and what's a girlhood without a fancy toy that eats AA batteries like popcorn?

Gogglebox On The Go

Portable televisions were all the rage in the '90s, with pages dedicated to them in the Argos catalogue (or your regional equivalent). The Game Gear tuned into this trend by releasing their TV Tuner peripheral that sat in the cart slot and allowed gamers to watch colour TV on the go. Totally radical!

Fixing a Game Gear is delicate work, but it's not impossible. See, the first thing you understand when taking apart a system is that it's not nearly as scary as you think it is with proper guidance. It's all in trusting yourself to be careful and not mess it up. The Game Gear, in particular, is pretty straightforward. The main screws in each back corner come out easy enough, and the proprietary safety screw (a 4.5mm) is easily undone with the right screwdriver (or a handy, jerry-rigged device created with the help of a YouTube tutorial). Once you get them unfastened, and carefully separate the aged plastic, the system splits open like an oyster.

Inside, your pearl — the motherboard. Every Game Gear with original parts either has failed or will fail soon thanks to this platter of circuitry. The units that haven't already will begin to grow a little quieter, or get a little darker, with each passing month. Soon, they won't make a sound or display a lick of the paltry but appreciated backlit screen.

The cause here is two-fold, and stems not from the caps themselves, but from both the ways used to fasten them and the console's environment. Surface-mounted capacitors were new in the early '90s, and the methodologies for making them last for the long haul weren't all there yet. On top of that, handheld game systems were often in the hands of children (and kids at heart) who would leave their consoles in hazardous conditions for a sloppy cap job. Cars, basements, attics, a sock drawer, that windowsill by your bed... these are all risks.

The electrolytic fluid inside these capacitors, simply put, goes bad. It shifts, leaks, oozes, and, over time, starts to solidify. This process eventually kills the capacitors, rendering them useless and in dire need of repair. It chills me to think this is where many Game Gears likely met their maker — discarded in yard sales, Goodwills, landfills. I don't believe in humanity enough to think most people want to fix their broken tech rather than throw it away and forget about it.

I wouldn’t think about things this way if it wasn’t for my girlfriend. She’s the type to never give up on something until it’s totally hopeless. For almost a year, she’s treated my childhood LG plasma television like a Ship of Theseus — trying to fix it piece by piece, whenever she could track down and afford parts. I told her she could give up, but she refused because she believed in her heart it could be fixed. Even if she doesn’t know how to fix something, she’ll learn as fast as possible because my girlfriend doesn’t believe in giving up on things, and finds her humanity in technomancy. I love her for that.

So when she handed me a soldering iron and told me, “okay, you try,” I had to make her proud. She’d shown me long YouTube videos, how-to guides, system teardowns, blueprints, everything she possibly could to get me ready. But nothing could really prepare me for the process itself — the tangible reality of holding a super-heated tool and being told to take apart a console. She’d shown me how to do it, how to hold the iron to the connector, liquify the prongs, and lift off the part — but the actual experience was... daunting.

Have you ever taken fish oil capsules? I can’t divine your answer from the page, but I’ll assume you said yes. Now, have you ever dropped one of those, then stepped on it and splattered the goo all over your feet? Gross, I know. Well, that’s what heated electrolytic fluid smells like, except hot, ten times more pungent, and a few feet from your face. As you take off caps, you can’t avoid melting away this excess fluid if you want to achieve your goal, and it reeks. It’s an unavoidable part of the process, and one that I can’t imagine is a big selling point for most.

“Want to hold a hot iron that can and definitely will burn you to melt away small computer parts that smell like fish?” Not exactly a charming prospect.

So... why pursue it? Simply put, I feel like the Game Gear deserves it. Sega’s history of unsung consoles doesn’t need to be recounted, but I do need to emphasise that failure and ambition define their hardware oeuvre. The Sega CD offered incredible experiences that the industry stuffed with mostly forgettable FMV titles, instead of more boundary-breaking releases like *Sonic CD* or *Ecco the Dolphin*. The Saturn is unfairly remembered as a failure in most markets, despite pushing narrative horror, home fighters, and quirky FMV experiments like D to new heights. And the Dreamcast... Well, it speaks for itself.

The Game Gear is special to me, though, because it’s perhaps the first major indicator of how things would shake out for Sega. Eager to make a product objectively better than a Game Boy, Sega poured all its resources into making the supreme handheld experience. Designed to have a form factor similar to a Genesis controller, powered by the innards of the Master System, and capable of 4096 colours, the Game Gear is arguably the earliest promise of a !:1 experience between handheld and home consoles.

Sega knew they had a winner. Tom Kalinske, then-president of Sega, recalls seeing a Game Gear for the first time on a flight in Blake J. Harris’ *Console Wars*. He was blown away by the range of colours on the handheld, and

felt confident that Sega could trump Nintendo. After the console’s successful Japanese launch, Sega of America ran a series of intense attack ads against the Game Boy. In one, a heavyset man clubs himself on the head with a dead squirrel to see colour while playing *Super Mario Land*. In another, a dog looks between the Game Gear and Game Boy, unable to distinguish between the two.

“If you were colourblind and had an IQ of twelve,” the smug narrator taunts, “you wouldn’t care what portable you had either. Of course, you wouldn’t care if you drank from the toilet, either.”

If you can believe it, this didn’t do wonders for the system in the US. The marketing mostly fell flat, outside of skirting some public controversy with Nintendo. Further, it failed to mask what would ultimately be the Game Gear’s holy trinity of problems when compared to the competition. The exorbitant price (\$149.99 USD v. the Game Boy’s \$89.99), the critical battery life (3-5 hours on six AAs vs 15-20 on four AAs), and the niche library versus a system with a year-plus of titles to choose from. These were massive oversights that Sega had arguably not accounted for. But does this make the Game Gear a bad system?

I asked myself this as I seared my finger on the soldering iron. The last pieces were almost out, and my hands were tired. My hand tilted just a bit, and I felt an intense sting, followed by a painful cold, capped off by an intense burn. I yelped like a little girl, and my skin wasn’t right for a few weeks. In my pain, I got mad at the Game Gear. I cursed it, cursed its library, cursed this whole process. Cursed my own pitch for this very book, even, for this system that I have a deep love for.

But I was close to halfway done — a few caps left to desolder, and a fresh set from a specialty shop right next to me. Burnt but not ready to give in, I set the iron down and took a breather before I continued. My partner got up to clean something, and in my frustration, I didn’t notice she accidentally bumped the iron into the console’s outer shell. I didn’t notice for about a minute or two. Until burnt plastic mingled with metallic fish. Panicked, I glanced over, saw the plastic melting, and froze in fear like I always do.

My girlfriend noticed the smell and came running, but it was too late: a hole had been burnt straight into the case, and our basement was full of plastic fumes. She helped me find a new one online, but part of me didn’t care anymore.

What was the point? No, really. I didn’t know anymore. I had copies of *Sonic 2* and *Ecco the Dolphin* raring to go — two favourites from my emulation days — but I didn’t care. I could emulate them on our MiSTer. I didn’t need a stupid console with bad games and piss-poor battery life. I knew I had to finish this article you’re reading right now, but had no idea how I’d do it, because I’d lost the investment. The well-preserved, near-pristine console now had a melty hole that would expose the new caps to the elements. My dreams of a perfect Game Gear, too, were melted and tasted like burnt plastic under my tongue.

In my heart, I was still jealous of that girl in my summer school the year my parents divorced. She could play *Sonic* any time she wanted. I still couldn’t do that, 21 years later.

It took another person close to me to help me find the drive again — another trans woman I’ve interchangeably called my best friend and my sister. We’ve been friends for over two years, and for most of that time, she’s been in the closet to all but a few people. She’s looked to me for guidance, and, in turn, I’ve looked to her for inspiration. In our weekly Discord calls, we bare our souls in ways that feel scary, safe, and overpowering. I feel like I can share a part of me with her that I can otherwise only share with my girlfriend, and that bond means everything to me.

She visited me for the first time with her partner — another dear friend — and we went game shopping together. She asked me about this piece, and suddenly, I felt excited about it again.

We shopped for games together. I showed her a bunch of Game Gear stuff at Retro Game Trader in Portland, gushing and beaming like a giggly teenage stereotype the whole time. I kept apologising like we both always do to each other when we go on tangents about things we love. She told me not to, just like always. It’s... a thing. Our thing. And we had it in person, at this glass Game Gear cabinet and at every single vinyl rack she came across.

Sonic the Hedgehog: Triple Trouble, *Ecco: The Tides of Time*, *Castle of Illusion*, and *Streets of Rage 2* (for my girlfriend) — these were my picks. As I talked to my friend about each game (and why they were worth getting), and asked if she’d heard of them, she smiled at me, and I felt my love for the Game Gear come alive again. I remem-

The Nomadic Lifestyle

The Nomad was Sega’s follow-up to their Game Gear. With so many popular titles on their first handheld being Master System titles it perhaps made a lot of sense to just let people play their Genesis games on the go, especially given the popularity of their 4th generation console. Sadly, the Nomad only saw release in North America, but it’s a great way to play 16-bit games on the go (unlike the Mega Jet)!

bered the bad circa-2010 emulators, and all of the warm, hazy memories that came with them.

I wanted to fix my Game Gear and share it with her. To show this person who didn’t know as much about this particular era of gaming as me or my partner something new. In that moment, my heart was full of love for two women and for the Sega Game Gear.

And that’s when it hit me, that I relate to the Game Gear on a deeply personal level. I’m an extremely messy person. My life as a trans woman, with both BPD and autism, has left me full of broken capacitors, and in need of so much. I need somebody to take out those broken parts. I need somebody to play games on me. I need someone to help me be me, and I need someone else to share *that* person with — fish smells, weird tastes, et al.

I need both, you see, and I want a future where both are possible between my girlfriend and my best friend. They know this, because I will never hide a feeling from them. No matter how it plays out — good or bad — we’re going to fix *these* capacitors together, too. Our emotional capacitors, as a triad of suffering and pining trans women.

To me, the Game Gear is a bad system in the same way that some people would consider me a bad person for my needs. It has some crippling flaws that make it woefully inadequate compared to more popular alternatives. Prone to breakage and only of interest to niche types, it’s an unshapely and spiteful thing to many.

However, with enough love, attention to detail, curiosity, and understanding, it’s worth caring for and playing. Not everybody will love it — most people won’t, in fact. But people that can find those things to hold onto will be rewarded with untold depths and a lifetime of adventure.



why did we fix a game gear?.

GUNSTAR HEROES.

Towards the end of the Game Gear’s life, developers seemed to produce the impossible by squeezing every ounce of graphical power from Sega’s handheld. *Gunstar Heroes* is one of those titles as it seems to defy reality with its speed and presentation, given the system’s limitations. The original *Gunstar* released on the Mega Drive in September 1993 to great success, and publisher Sega was keen to bring it to other platforms. Treasure, the infamous development team that split from Konami, had no interest in porting their game to the now ageing handheld, so Sega passed the Game Gear port to M2.

The developer was building a name for itself in porting established titles and took on what would be its toughest challenge yet. *Gunstar Heroes* is well known for its amazing graphics, large levels and impressive gameplay. To bring all that 16-bit glory to such a small device would mean dropping many of the game’s features. It was, however, kept mostly intact and boasts six levels out of the original seven. The game’s intro sequence was also included, and most of the attack moves remained.

It was not all positive though, as M2 decided to put most of the Game Gear’s power into reproducing as detailed graphics as possible, meaning the sound took a huge hit. The broad, lush tunes of its 16-bit older brother are cast out and replaced with basic bleeps that sound muddled and distant. It just shows how much they needed to scale down to fit this behemoth of a game onto the Game Gear’s tiny carts. Looking back, it was the right choice. If the graphics had taken a hit then the game would have lost everything that made the original a success.

The other difficulty they faced was with the weapons system. This has been ported over more or less complete, but the features are stifled due to the small screen size. In *Gunstar*, you combine two of four weapons together to make a bigger blast. This helped clear waves of enemies across the big screen, but these benefits are lost on the Game Gear version. The basic weapons are often more effective, making one of the more interesting features in the game redundant. Your character can still perform body slams and throws for close combat though, and these become even more relevant on the smaller screen.

What makes *Gunstar Heroes* on the Game Gear impressive are its graphics. The levels have been scaled down but the detail is still there from the original. The sprites are surprisingly large and the animation is outstanding. The speed is here as well; the levels zip along and the enemies keep coming. The Game Gear’s extended colour palette has been used to its fullest and this is simply one of the most beautiful-looking handheld games of the ’90s. It may have come too late to save the Game Gear, but this title showed exactly what it was capable of.

PUYO PUYO 2.

When we think about block puzzle games on handhelds, many minds would leap to *Tetris* on the mighty Game Boy. That is understandable; it smashed all kinds of sales records and introduced video games to many people who might never have picked one up. However, in Japan, another block puzzler went toe-to-toe with *Tetris* and has every right to be put alongside it. The original *Puyo Puyo* game was released on everything from arcades to the Famicom and was a huge success. The second game released a few years later in December 1994 and is considered one of the Game Gear’s best titles.

But don’t worry if you haven’t heard of it because the only contemporary Western release was on the ill-fated Neo Geo Pocket Color. The game itself is simple — match four Puyo blobs of the same colour together to make them disappear. They fall in sets of two from the top of the screen and can be rotated. If two players are going head-to-head, cleared Puyo blobs will be dumped into your opponents’ screen making it harder for them to clear their board. And just like every block puzzler, once the screen fills it’s game over.

For the Game Gear version, developer Compile was forced into the usual slimming down required when arcade games are ported to a handheld. The core gameplay has been kept intact for the most part, but the story is gone and we don’t learn anything about the characters you battle. There is a single-player mode for practicing your combos as well as options to control the subtle rules of the game. The graphics have taken an obvious hit in the detail department but the extended colour palette of the Game Gear helps keep the screen clear.

Puyo Puyo 2 is also surprisingly fast on the Game Gear. The Puyo blobs can drop at immense speeds and the CPU-controlled players give you a tough challenge. As you progress through the rounds each character has their own tactic, some going for huge combos while others go for clearing Puyos quickly to pile on the pressure. Even the subtle complexities of countering your opponent’s attacks with your own combos can be found in this scaled-down version. And to top it off, connecting Game Gears, via the link cable, allows frenzied bouts of Puyo popping action with a friend.

It begs the question; why did it not release globally? It is a perfect fit for puzzle fans around the world. The Game Gear already had the popular *Columns* that sold well during its lifespan and the original *Puyo Puyo* was re-skinned as *Dr. Robotnik’s Mean Bean Machine* for Western audiences. It feels like a wasted opportunity given the success *Puyo Puyo 2* was experiencing in Japan. We could consider that, by 1994, the Game Gear was in decline and this may have steered Compile’s decision. Whatever the reason, *Puyo Puyo 2* is a fine game that deserves more love.



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Gunstar Heroes
1995



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323
Puyo Puyo 2
1994

Visual Memory Unit

Manufacturer	Sega		
CPU	8-bit Sanyo LC8670		
Display	48 dot × 32 dot LCD		
Price	JP	¥ 2,500	
	US	\$ 19.99	
	UK	£19.99	



Gaga For Sega

The VMU saw a number of variations during its short time on the market, with various colours and branded models featuring the likes of Hello Kitty and Godzilla. This version was released alongside the game Segagaga (SGGG) in Japan, a title that both celebrated and poked fun at the company's own history. It saw Sega Tarō fighting to save Sega from its fictitious rival DOGMA in a parody of the issues the real-world company faced at the time.

You may be wondering why the Sega Visual Memory Unit has its own section in this book. To many, it's not a real handheld, but if you take a closer look you may be swayed because this Dreamcast (and NAOMI arcade machine) accessory is more than just a memory card — it can also be a handheld games console.

The primary reason the VMU exists is to hold save data for the Sega Dreamcast, which launched in 1998, and also acts as a second screen when plugged into the controller to assist with the gaming experience; such as showing your kill count in *Sword of the Berserk*, how much health you have left in *Resident Evil CODE: Veronica*, and even uses the built-in speaker to help players find items in *Skies of Arcadia*. However, it also has a host of other features accessible away from the home console — thanks to its 48 × 32 dot monochrome LCD screen — such as a real-time clock, and the ability to facilitate file transfers between friends.

For example, using the port on the top of the VMU, you can connect to another VMU in order to transfer game files from device to device, almost like trading Pokémon. Perhaps you can't beat a certain level and need a friend's save file to get you through it, or you just want them to experience a super cool late-game section of *Shenmue II*.

But more importantly, and the reason why the device is in this book, is the portable gaming capabilities of the VMU. One of the most popular portable games on the system is a mini-game called *Chao Adventure* which can be accessed via Sonic Team's first 3D Sonic game, *Sonic Adventure*.

In the Dreamcast game, you place your adorable Chao (a little blob with arms, legs and a face) onto a 3D-rendered VMU that acts as a transfer gateway to your actual VMU, allowing you to take the little critter with you wherever you go. You feed, play, and level up the Chao via the handheld console just like you would a *Tamagotchi*, using the tiny D-pad plus A and B buttons.

If you have a friend who also has *Sonic Adventure* and a VMU then you can connect them both to battle each other, or if that isn't your cup of tea and you'd rather make peace, you can slot your ports together and entice your Chao to mate in order to create adorable little Chao babies



— you just had to be very careful not to lose your dust cap!

Another incredible game that works on the VMU is one from *Shenmue* called *Shenmue Goodies*. Here you can trade in-game rare items called 'Winning Cans' for character animations on the VMU that can be taken with you on the go, just in case you need to show off how many of the 70 characters you have unlocked to your friends. This was accessed through *Shenmue Passport*, an additional disc that came with the main game, full of quirky little features and game information.

If you're a big fan of *Skies of Arcadia* you'll be happy to know that there is a VMU game called *Pinta's Quest*, packed with six different minigames. One allows you to harvest gold while you're away from your Dreamcast, another allows you to trade items with other ships, and you can even scout out new items to upgrade your character in-game when you get back home.

During its time, the VMU had a couple of major issues when it came to portability, the first being the poor battery life. Each VMU required two CR2032 batteries for it to work — not only were these batteries expensive and hard to come by in the late '90s, but they didn't last very long either. Secondly, the VMU only had 128kb of internal storage, meaning it was literally impossible to load all of those cool little *Shenmue* animations onto your device, even when you have deleted all other game files.

The VMU was absolutely ahead of its time. It was a unique selling point for the Dreamcast itself, but as a portable games console, it seemed more like a gimmick than a usable portable device, even if I was incredibly jealous of the kids that brought their Chao to school!

Even though it was not designed solely to be a portable games device — as evidenced by less than 30 Dreamcast games having downloadable minigames for it — still more games than the Mega Duck ever had — it's a beloved little console even now, especially when it's combined with Sega's last stab at video game consoles. People are, to this day, modding them with backlights, rechargeable batteries, extra storage, and some modders have even replaced the internals entirely to create a micro retro gaming console with a full-colour screen. Just like the Dreamcast itself, there is life in this little unit yet!



NEO GEO POCKET COLOR.

First Released:
1999

Manufacturer:
SNK

Launch Price:
JP ¥8,900
US \$69.95
UK £59.99

The Neo Geo Pocket was a 16-bit handheld console made by Japanese developer SNK. Making its debut in October of 1998, the device aimed to compete with the original Game Boy and the newer Game Boy Color, which were both 8-bit handheld consoles. And while its sales numbers never quite lived up to expectations, the Neo Geo Pocket is still considered an important addition to the history of handheld consoles.

The original monochrome model first made its appearance in the Japan and Hong Kong markets. It also had a limited release in Europe, but never made its way to the Americas. The new console only saw a total of ten games in its very short lifespan, mostly due to the fact that it only took SNK about five months to release the successor in Japan: the Neo Geo Pocket Color. The Neo Geo Pocket Color reached the American and European markets later in 1999. Matching the Game Boy Color's retail price of \$69.99, SNK set itself up to be a viable option in the handheld gaming market.

One of the most unique features of the Neo Geo Pocket console design was its microswitch joystick, known for its clicky sound. The 8-direction joystick had a very accurate input response, especially for fighting games, which SNK was becoming known for.

The Neo Geo Pocket and the Neo Geo Pocket Color both had an LCD screen with no internal backlight. However, the screen was widely considered to be one of the most impressive at the time. If you need proof, look no further than the stunning console loading animation that introduces the 'NEO GEO' text with hundreds of crisp pixels animating at a gorgeous frame rate.

The Neo Geo Pocket Color was capable of up to 146 simultaneous colours on screen (the Game Boy Color could only display 56), 16 palettes per plane, and 64 sprites per frame. What that breaks down to is a lot of stuff happening on screen at once, which resulted in exciting gameplay. The display resolution was 160 by 152 pixels — 1280 more pixels than the Game Boy!

The handheld also boasted up to 40 hours of playtime on two AA batteries, besting any of the handhelds on the market at

the time. The Neo Geo Pocket was one of the first consoles to implement an internal lithium CR2032 battery to backup its clock and console settings. This also eliminated the need for batteries inside the game cartridges for saving game progress.

The 'Pocket Menu' was the console's internal operating system, which could be accessed when powering the console on without a game loaded. This menu consisted of system-specific settings, such as date, time, and language, as well as a few utilities, such as a calendar, alarm clock, and daily horoscope (yes, really). Many of the settings, such as the language options, would automatically be used when loading a game that supported those settings. So there was no more selecting your language every time you loaded a new game!

There were a few interesting accessories released for the console during its short stay on the market too, the first being the Neo Geo Pocket Link Cable, which worked as you might expect — it created a wired link between two consoles, allowing you to exchange data or compete in battles with another user. There was also a Neo Geo Pocket/Sega Dreamcast Link Cable which allowed data transfer between compatible games on both consoles, such as the *King of Fighters* and *Capcom vs. SNK* games. And finally, there was a wireless communication adapter, which allowed for the transfer of game data to another console, but was not fast enough to allow for players to compete with each other using the device.

The Neo Geo Pocket Color is fully backwards compatible with the original monochrome games, and interestingly, the original monochrome console is mostly forwards compatible too, meaning it can play most of the Color titles in monochrome. This is a feature that was blocked by most Game Boy Color games at the time, presumably to encourage players to purchase the upgraded console.

In colour games of that time, colour palettes were assigned to the predetermined shades on screen. So by ignoring those colour palettes, most games could potentially work exactly the same in black, white, and shades of grey. It was pretty forward thinking of SNK to allow this fallback, giving maximum compatibility in their console family.

How Much?!

Unlike its console sibling, cartridges for the Pocket were reasonably priced as they used the same ROM technology as most cartridges from the time. Neo Geo AES games, in comparison, used the same huge 19 x 14 cm cartridges as its arcade counterpart, the MVS. Bitmap Bureau released their 2019 game Xeno Crisis on a Neo Geo cart with a price tag of £299.99, but even original games can set you back anywhere from £50 to £2000.



Two Cool

Based largely on Sonic The Hedgehog 2, Sonic Pocket Adventure for the Neo Geo Pocket Color was well-received upon release. Though published by Sega, this game didn't have any compatibility with its Dreamcast console counterparts via the Neo Geo Pocket Link Cable, which connected the handheld to a Dreamcast. Games like Cool Cool Jam would connect with their Dreamcast equivalent (in this case Cool Cool Toon) to provide cool cool extras.

Perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the popularity of the Neo Geo Pocket was its impressive line-up of exclusive and third-party games. SNK was both a hardware and software developer. Their own development team created some of the most popular games for the system, including *The King of Fighters*, *Fatal Fury*, and *Metal Slug* series. And successful partnerships with the likes of Sega, Taito, Namco, and Capcom brought even more essential games to the Neo Geo Pocket. In total, there were 92 games released on both versions of the console — the strong quality of those games adding to its retrospective popularity.

Not to be counted out, SNK released the New Neo Geo Pocket Color in October of 1999. Yes, only one year after the release of the Neo Geo Pocket, SNK was already pushing a third iteration of the console into the market. This slimmer model was available only in Japan, and was 13% smaller, while also boasting improved sound output.

Sadly, the Neo Geo Pocket family of consoles had a lot of stiff competition, with the likes of Nintendo and its *Pokémon* franchise absolutely dominating the handheld gaming market at the time. They were also facing the inevitable release of the 32-bit Game Boy Advance. It was reported that SNK was only ever able to pull in about 2% of the market share with the sales of the Neo Geo Pocket and Neo Geo Pocket Color. It's estimated that the Neo Geo Pocket Color sold just over two million units.

Financial troubles for SNK, as well as poor communication with developers and retailers outside of Japan, also contributed to the downfall of both SNK and the Neo Geo Pocket. Many original team members quit the company after its purchase by an American pachinko manufacturer (yes, those very loud and annoying gambling arcade machines). That new owner had very little interest in home video game consoles and wanted to leverage SNK game

IP for their gambling machines. They ended all business outside of Japan, and SNK eventually went bankrupt in October of 2001 — just three years after the release of the first Neo Geo Pocket.

The ephemeral life of the Neo Geo Pocket is not commensurate to the legacy it left on the history of portable consoles. Gamers are still trying to get their hands on one of the two million units out there to experience this one-of-a-kind handheld. If you are lucky enough to add one to your collection, due to its backwards and forwards compatibility and no regional lockout on any of the devices, you would have plenty of options for gaming.

And, if you have no moral qualms about the use of them, there are flash memory game carts available, which means you can have the entire Neo Geo Pocket game library on one convenient game cartridge. Backlit screen upgrade kits, brand new console shells, and colourful buttons are also available, giving new life to these retro devices. With the popularity of retro gaming and the rise of homebrew game development, we may start to see new games created for the beloved console in the near future. Surely, it will be due to the efforts of retro game collectors and modders that the spirit of this incredible console will be kept alive.

In retrospect, it is fair to say that SNK's Neo Geo Pocket was one of the most important handheld consoles to come from the twentieth century. Its short stay on the market is overshadowed by the strong legacy that it evokes. That lasting power is particularly fueled by the stellar collection of games offered in its three year run.

It would be hard to imagine any list of the best handheld consoles to not feature the Neo Geo Pocket, and we surely won't be one to ignore this very unique, beautiful, and forward thinking handheld system.



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324
Neo Geo Pocket Color [Platinum Silver]
1999

325
Biomotor Unitron [Neo Geo Pocket Color]
1999

326
Metal Slug: 2nd Mission [Neo Geo Pocket Color]
2000

ANALOGUE POCKET.



First Released:
2021

Manufacturer:
Analogue

Launch Price:
WW \$219.99

**Further Product
Goodness (by)
Analogue**

Analogue is no stranger to FPGA-based consoles, having already produced the Super Nt, the Mega Sg and the Nt Mini. While fairly successful, the Pocket has been their most talked about and desired product to date.

Analogue has been at the forefront of remaking old consoles and giving them new life for quite some time now, something Nintendo and Sega should have done themselves long ago.

In late 2019, after a very rocky pre-order process and many delays, Analogue Pockets were released into the wild one by one and it was the first time in a long time that I'd seen the retro handheld scene get that much attention. It was as if Nintendo themselves had launched a new product, but no, instead Analogue had taken it into their own hands to create something the handheld community wanted — a modernised version of the Game Boy, that didn't use emulation. Instead, the Pocket used a technology called FPGA.

FPGA stands for Field Programmable Gate Array and it's quite simply a piece of technology that is designed to replicate the original hardware, making the cartridges think they are being executed on, in this case, the original Game Boy.

If a Western company were to create a pre-loaded emulation console at the scale that Analogue have produced the Pocket, it would have immediately been stopped with multiple cease and desist letters from Nintendo. China has many different laws that cover this particular area, which is why it seems like they are getting away with it time and time again with the release of constant handheld emulators pre-loaded with lots of Nintendo and Sega games.

But Analogue works around this issue by using custom-built FPGA technology that dodges the legal issues that typically come with other handheld emulators, alongside it having many technical advantages such as flawless gameplay quality — something which typical emulators struggle with even if given adequate CPU power. This makes the gameplay on the Pocket silky smooth, and prevents odd technical issues like corrupt save files, low frame rates, and audio bugs. Think of it as a step beyond traditional emulation, and a way to make a piece of hardware as close to the original as possible without it attracting any legal issues.

This also allows the Analogue Pocket

to work with over 2,700 original Game Boy cartridges. If that wasn't enough, they have even launched adapters that slide into the cartridge slot allowing the device to play Game Gear, Neo Geo, and even Atari Lynx cartridges flawlessly, with few or even no technical hiccups. This feature alone makes it a perfect product for cartridge collectors, and a way for handheld gamers to use original games partnered with modern hardware.

The Analogue Pocket only being able to play authentic cartridges does come with a couple of issues, however, the main one being the current state of the cartridge market. Retro games are at an all-time high in terms of price. Collectors are hoarding hundreds of games, many cartridges have been lost or broken over time, and the sealed games market is more profitable than ever, attracting wealthy collectors and investors into the scene.

This makes retro games and cartridges hard to source at an affordable price, which makes the Analogue Pocket an expensive handheld to play on, especially when some retro games are more expensive than modern day games on release day. So even though the FPGA technology is great, it does make the handheld a pricey product to run if you're looking to pick up old cartridges frequently.

Like typical Analogue products, the build quality is incredible. Many of Analogue's die-hard fans have spoken highly about their products' build quality, and this being my first attempt at trialling one of their systems, I can comfortably say they were all right. The handheld is similar in size to that of an original DMG Game Boy, but with far more weight and far more technology packed inside.

It features an incredibly bright 3.5" screen with a resolution of 1600 x 1440, making the classic worm light a distant memory. There's no more searching for a light source to play your games — the Pocket has one of the best screens I have seen on a small handheld device, period. It's one of its best features, and it completely transforms your memories of diluted, pixelated gameplay. Inserting an old cartridge genuinely feels like you're playing a new game, simply due to the fact the stunning, colourful screen packs the same luminescence as a lighthouse — or at least that's how it feels!

The Pocket boasts a sleek and modern look, while also paying respect to retro technology in the form of its selection of ports and its cartridge slot. For example, they have decided not only to keep the headphone jack (a port seemingly going the way of the dodo in the mobile market), but also the original trading cable port, allowing you to play with other Analogue Pocket or Game Boy owners, and trade Pokémon like the good old days.

If that wasn't enough, you can even purchase a dock that allows you to play your handheld games on a HD screen via the HDMI port at the back of the dock, just like the Nintendo Switch. Connect up a Bluetooth controller and you're ready to play classic Game Boy games on the big screen — and what a magical moment that is.

This dock in itself allows you to play Game Boy games like never before. My 10-year-old self would be so happy that he could play *Super Mario Land* on a giant screen using wireless controllers. The transition is also very seamless, and moving from portable mode to dock mode while paused is as easy as its sounds.

The Analogue Pocket is a prime example of what happens when a company with expertise does exactly what the handheld community wants. For years now, many handheld enthusiasts have wanted a Game Boy Mini or a remake of the console just like Nintendo did with the NES and SNES Mini consoles, but with each passing year such a device seems more and more unlikely.

Analogue saw a gap in the market, witnessed the ever-growing modding community and decided to find a workaround using FPGA technology. Yes, they had some hiccups — regarding pricing, release dates, and their choice to ignore many community members throughout the creation process — but nonetheless they stuck to their promise and delivered one of the best modern takes on retro technology that I have seen in a long time.

It gives me hope for the future of retro handhelds. Nintendo are known to do their own thing, but at times they miss out on huge opportunities in the market, especially when they ignore the preservation of video games. Companies like Analogue should be welcomed with open arms when they build something of such an impressive calibre as this.

With the Pocket we are witnessing the beginning of a new era for retro consoles being rebuilt using modern technology. We constantly see remakes of video games, but now it's time to see remakes of games consoles. Yes, Sega and Nintendo will likely do their thing and keep their remakes somewhat affordable, but they bottle-neck themselves with adding only a fixed number of games to their plug-and-play mini consoles, whereas Analogue go above and beyond using cartridges as their selling point, meaning consumer choice is practically limitless.

So for that, I applaud Analogue for what they are doing in the retro gaming space. They are pushing boundaries when others are looking for quick profit. They are creating high-end products when others are building devices that feel like the toys inside Kinder Eggs. Innovation like this is so important within the gaming industry — it builds competition and shines a light on retro gaming, which is needed at a time when game preservation has seemingly been kicked to the curb. It's finally time to play those games in our collections, in the best quality we've ever been able to, and that is a truly wonderful thing.

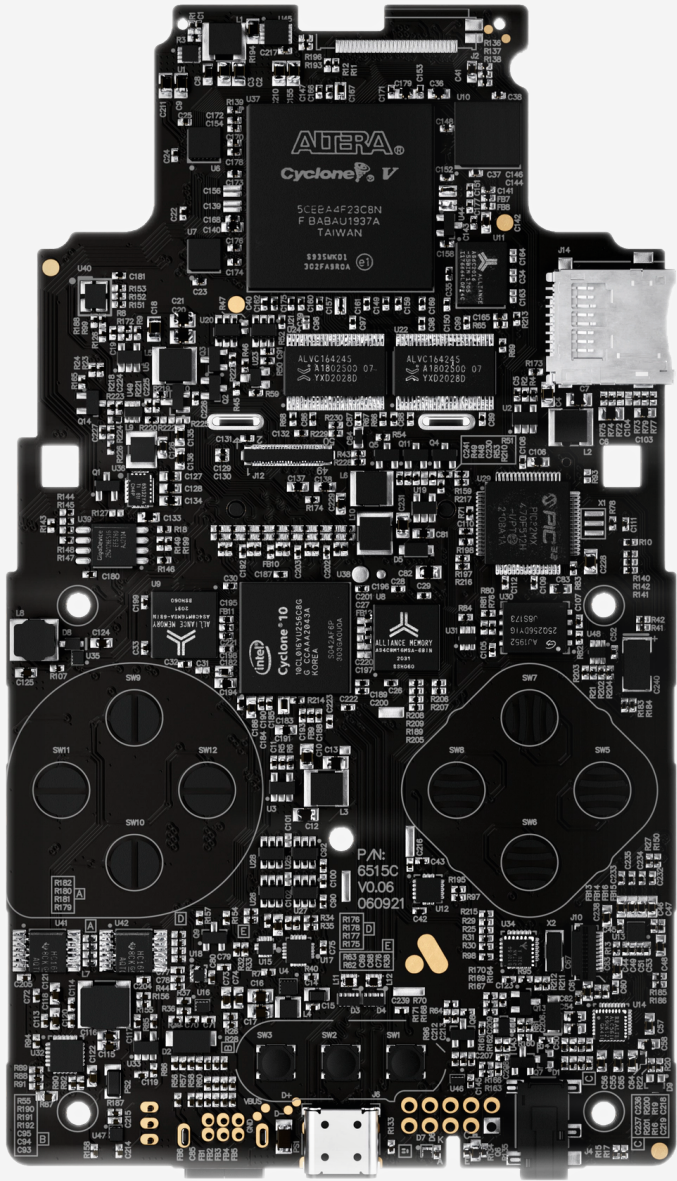


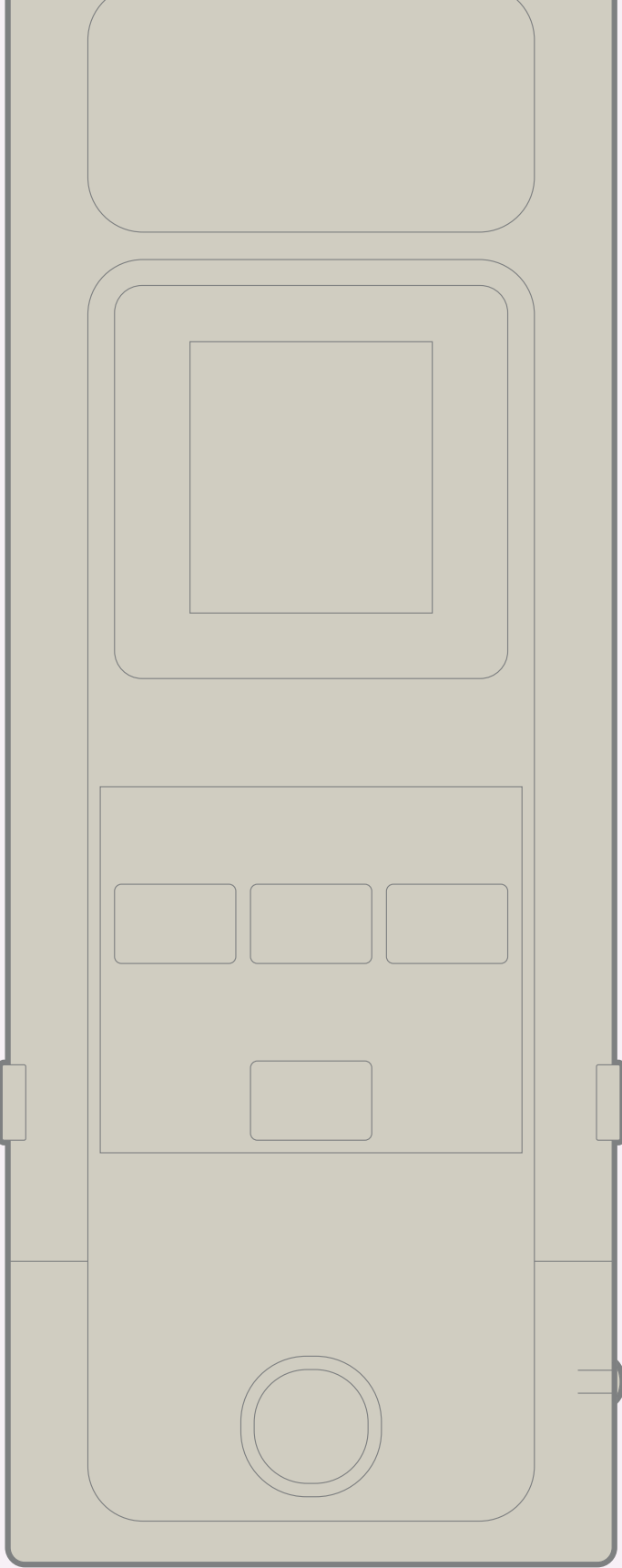
Simplicity Itself

Minimalist packaging is all the rage with high-end electronics, and it doesn't get simpler than this beautiful design for the Pocket. Fun fact, Analogue's logo was created by famed graphic designer Cory Schmitz, who also created the logo for this very book!

Like Father Like Son

Just like the consoles whose games you can play on this beautiful device, Analogue sells a range of accessories to improve the experience. There are no Worm Lights or TV Tuners here though. Instead, you can buy a hard case and screen protector to keep your Pocket safe from damage, a Pocket to Pocket link cable, plus the aforementioned cartridge adapters and dock.





Microvision

Manufacturer	Milton Bradley
CPU	Intel 8021/TI TMS1100 (on cartridge)
Display	16 x 16 Pixel LCD
Price	US \$49.99 UK £39.99

Baker's Dozen?

The Microvision received a total of 12 games in North America (8 in Europe), however, a 13th game titled Barrage was due to release in 1983, but never did. Speaking of the number 13, did you know that the Microvision appeared in the movie Friday the 13th Part II?!



The 1970s were what many would call the first decade of the gaming industry, a time when arcade cabinets flourished, TVs were the size of small cars, and the Atari logo was recognised worldwide. Children and families were naturally attracted to the cheap and cheerful toys of the decade such as Hungry Hungry Hippos, Rubik’s Cubes, Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots and Stretch Armstrong, but the boom in arcade games showed the world that this new form of entertainment was addictive, social, engaging, and, most importantly, lucrative. These newly minted video game companies saw the opportunity to create something that would eventually go on to change the gaming industry forever.

One games console that innovated far beyond what the likes of Atari was doing in the ‘70s was built by the Milton Bradley Company, which many will still know due to the popular blue and red MB logo that makes its way onto board games and other toys to this day. This game system was called the Microvision. It was launched in 1979 and was the world’s first handheld games console with interchangeable cartridges.

These cartridges were not like your traditional slot-in cartridges; instead, the Microvision’s cartridge was the entire faceplate of the device, making them almost one foot long and a little awkward to take on and off since it revealed the internals of the device, and needed to be slotted in the correct way otherwise it could break the handheld.

In total there were 12 games released for the Microvision, the most popular being *Blockbuster*, a game that required you to bounce a ball (seen as a single pixel) off of your moveable line and into the opposite wall. Each time it hits the wall a piece (also a pixel) would be removed, and your target was to get as many points as possible using the least amount of balls. This game was likely inspired by 1972’s popular Pong game by Atari.

To control the Microvision, each game cartridge came with its own controls layout that would sync up with the

buttons underneath the shell, which gave each game a unique look. However, every game would feature the paddle, as this twisting knob was affixed to the device. The tiny 16 x 16 screen was what many would describe as tolerable; however, it came with many issues which shortened the handheld's life span. One disadvantage, for instance, was the fact that the screen was incredibly fragile when in direct sunlight, so if left outside (as many kids tend to do) for long periods of time it would permanently damage the display. It was also susceptible to screen rot, which is when the liquid crystal inside the screen leaks and permanently darkens the screen, making it hard to see what’s going on whilst playing. If you managed to keep your Microvision in good condition though, then you had a high chance of enjoying it to its full potential.

In a time when you had to travel to the local arcades or visit your rich friend’s house in order to experience the latest video games, the Microvision exploded in popularity because it was one of the only consoles that allowed gamers to trade cartridges with friends and family. This feature alone made it feel like you were saving money, and gave you a chance to experience all of the cartridges that the console had to offer. Not only that, it added a social aspect to what was deemed by many as an unsociable hobby. You could now meet your friends who had a different game to you, and loan it to them before trading it back on the playground at school.

The team behind the Microvision started something that we still see within the gaming industry to this day — cartridges. It started a trend that made video games more inclusive, and even today gamers still trade their games with friends and families, all because the Milton Bradley Company tested the waters and made a technical advancement before anyone else.

For that, I applaud them. Nintendo took this feature to the next level with their Game Boy line, because not only did it make sense technically, but it made the collecting of games a whole new market that would consume gamers for many years to come.

TurboExpress

Manufacturer	NEC Home Electronics
CPU	H $\neq$ uC6280 @ 7.16 MHz / 1.79 MHz
Display	2.6-inch, 400×270
Price	JP ¥44,800
	US \$249.99



Developed by NEC Home Electronics, and released in 1990 for \$249.99 (interestingly seeing an increase in price in 1991 to \$299.99 due to higher display costs, before dropping down to \$199.99 in 1992), the TurboExpress is a unique and fascinating little nugget within handheld gaming history.

My first experience with the not-so-little console was after trading a BMX bike for one, along with a copy of *Splatterhouse* — a darn good deal by any measure. I played that game to the bone, completely wowed by how they managed to get console graphics on a tiny handheld. Sadly though, shortly thereafter, when my mom found out about my trade, I was forced to get my bike back. Thus ended my short but sweet time with that lovely brick of a console.

The Express was essentially a portable version of the TurboGrafx-16 (known as PC Engine outside North America), and despite being late to the party to compete with heavy hitters like Nintendo’s Game Boy, Sega’s Game Gear, and the Atari Lynx, it brought some pretty rad features to the table. The handheld, incredibly, could play full 16-bit TurboGrafx-16 games on its 2.5 inch full-colour, backlit screen (something, at the time, only Sega’s Game Gear could also boast). It was codenamed the ‘Game Tank’, and with its near actual brick-like size — and ability to go through 6 AA batteries in only 3 hours — it wore that name well.

Unfortunately, the TurboExpress, even with its slick all-black design and obvious technical upgrades over the likes of the Nintendo Game Boy’s monochrome un-lit screen, would only manage to sell 1.5 million units, causing it to pale in comparison to Sega’s Game Gear (which sold 10.2 million), and Nintendo’s aforementioned monochrome megahit with an incredible 118.69 million in lifetime sales (when counting the Game Boy Color).

The TurboExpress shipped with some pretty amazing accessories, such as the TurboVision; a TV tuner that allowed you to watch TV or, with the flip of a switch, return to play games. There was also the TurboLink which was essentially a link cable which allowed head-to-head gameplay between two devices.

Sadly, the system was not without its shortcomings. Aside from eating through batteries at breakneck speed, there were issues with the LCD screen. The technology was simply too new and, though cutting edge, was prone to dead pixels. The system also lacked the memory to save, so many games had password saving implemented instead, which wasn’t ideal. The size of the screen also caused text which had been optimised for TV play to be quite difficult to read in some instances on the handheld’s tiny screen (imagine how much squinting was required to play a text-heavy RPG? Gives you a headache just thinking about it, doesn’t it?).

In 1994, the TurboExpress was discontinued, with many pointing to the very high price point when compared to its competitors, and also a lack of software overall when compared to the Game Boy specifically — the TurboGrafx-16 only saw 678 games over its entire lifespan

[1987-1999], while the Game Boy had over 1000 games during its 14 years on the market — as the reasons for its quick demise.

Trivia time: The TurboExpress had an extended 15 minutes of fame when it starred alongside Will Smith and Gene Hackman in the blockbuster movie *Enemy of the State*, with the handheld acting as the film’s ‘MacGuffin’, as it had a cart that contained video evidence crucial to the film’s story. Haul this out at your next trivia night to impress everyone.



Wipe Out!

While Circus Lido certainly wouldn’t trouble any lists for greatest games of all time, it does have a storied history, which makes it an interesting title to look at. Essentially, the game released in Japan in 1991, but only to libraries. Yes, really. This led it to become one of the rarest PC Engine games in the ’90s, fetching thousands of dollars if you could find a copy on auction sites. However, in the year 2000 more copies started showing up on Amazon.jp for its original retail price. It’s not clear where they came from, but they wiped out the value of the game overnight. Ouch...



328



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331

328
Street Fighter II
1993

330
Coryoon
1991

329
Magical Chase
1991

331
Splatterhouse
1990

NOT SO PORTABLE

As seen in the images below, there were two more ways to take your PC Engine games on the go... kinda. The PC Engine LT was essentially a standard PC Engine with a built in screen and speakers, almost like a laptop. The only downside was this needed to be plugged in to use, meaning it wasn't something you could play on the bus. The PC Engine DUO Monitor, meanwhile, was a portable screen that could be used with a variety of NEC consoles, as a television with a built-in TV tuner, and could even be connected to another source should you have the right cable.



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PC Engine DUO Monitor
1991

334
PC Engine GT
1990

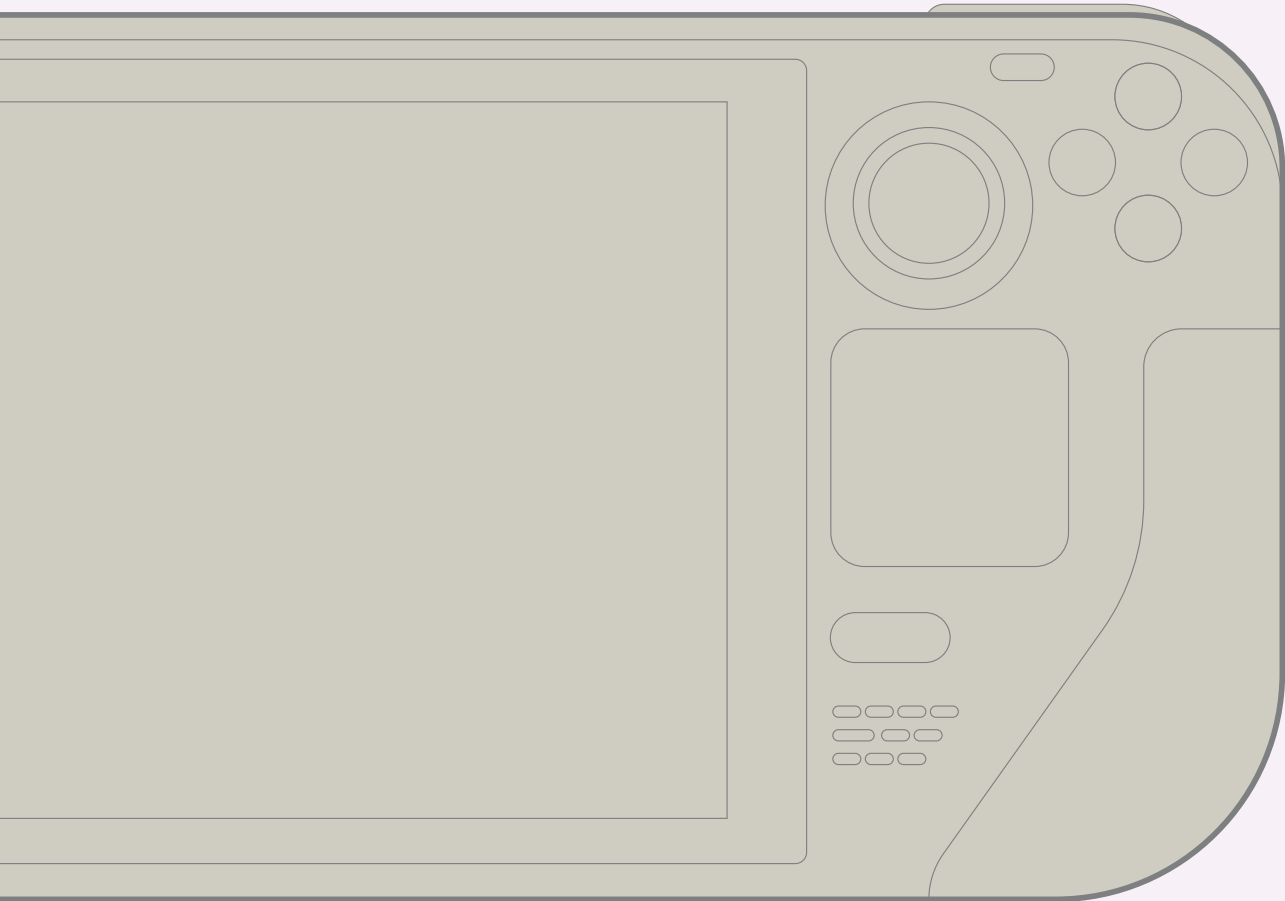


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333
PC Engine LT
1991

335
TurboExpress
1990

Steam Deck	
Manufacturer	Valve
CPU	Zen 2, 4-core, @ 2.4–3.5 GHz
Display	7-inch, 1280 × 800
Price	JP ¥44,000
	US \$399.00
	UK £349.00



This is it. The Steam Deck is everything we’ve been working towards since the Game Boy. I say ‘we’ because as someone who has an intimate relationship with portable gaming devices, I feel like my name should be on the patent for this thing. We always dreamed of the Steam Deck, but someone just finally figured out how to turn it into reality. It is the flying car or the teleportation machine of video games. Valve Software even took the ‘Deck’ name from cyberpunk fiction because it knows what it has created.

The first thing you need to ask yourself with the Steam Deck is this: how important is it really to put a games system into your pocket? In a world with literally dozens of devices that fit that specification, it is increasingly less crucial to me. But if you’re going to give up the pocket-size form factor, you better get everything else right. The thing about the Steam Deck is that it does exactly that. You cannot put it in your pocket, but you can play *God of War* (2018) at the park.

The Steam Deck is comfortable, powerful, and supremely well-engineered. It gets hot, but not anywhere near where you’re going to hold it. It needs active cooling, and yet you can get three-to-four hours of battery life from many modern games — longer if you’re playing something less demanding.

This is a laptop in different clothing, but that’s only the tip of the iceberg. This handheld runs Linux, which empowers it to take advantage of decades worth of open-source efforts by dedicated contributors and maintainers. But Valve turned this *workable* concept into something exquisite through incredible compatibility tools and a brilliant UX software layer.

Yes, this is a computer. But it’s a computer that behaves like a console. You can put it to sleep without worrying about your games bugging out. You can control everything in handheld mode with the gamepad. And everything from your library to your friends list is never more than a few button presses away.

Plus, when it’s time to boot up a game, chances are it’s going to work. That’s true even if you want to play a Windows game on this Linux machine. This is magic. Software translation between Windows and Linux was slow and unreliable for years and then Valve began contributing to the efforts. And now the Steam Deck runs *Elden Ring* at a more consistent frame rate than my RTX 3080 Ti.

The Steam Deck is one of the best gaming PCs ever. And while you might hear some people say that you should wait for a second generation, they’re wrong. A lot of the reasoning behind that comes down to value. In much the same way Nintendo justified the Game Boy with its \$90 price, Valve justifies the Steam Deck with its \$400 starting price. Even at \$650 for a 512GB SSD, you are getting a stunning deal. Here are the key specs:

AMD APU
Zen 2 CPU @ 2.4-3.5GHz
4 cores and 8 threads

RDNA 2 @ 1.0-1.6GHz
8 compute units
16GB of LPDDR5 memory

To put that into context, you can get a comparable handheld from other companies with worse software and less-powerful specs, and you would still have to pay nearly twice what Valve is charging.

And it’s not like you can notice other areas where Valve skimped on components. The display is gorgeous if not quite as beautiful as the Nintendo Switch OLED. It also has all the inputs you need. Sure, the D-pad isn’t great for fighting games, and the touchpads don’t feel as nice as they do on the Valve Index VR headset. But otherwise, the Steam Deck feels like you are holding a big Xbox controller, and that is fantastic.

In other ways, the Steam Deck feels like it should be a \$2,000 device. The speakers, for example, are the best you’ll ever get on a handheld, and the analogue triggers feel accurate and responsive. You can tell that Valve made value the first priority — although, Valve founder Gabe Newell puts it another way.

“I want to pick [the Steam Deck] up and say, ‘oh, it all works. It’s all fast.’ And then price point was secondary and painful,” Newell said in an interview with IGN in July 2021. “But [price] was pretty clearly a critical aspect to it. But the first thing was the performance and the experience — [that] was the biggest and most fundamental constraint that was driving this.”

Gabe Newell’s pain, however, turned into astronomical value for gamers. While Valve is obviously subsidising the cost with the hope of making up money with software sales — a strategy that is common in the console space — it’s worth examining how this is even possible in the first place.

The gaming industry and the graphics industry spent the first 15 years of this century chasing huge returns on investment in 3D visuals. Every couple of years, power was doubling while costs were dropping by half. This was a great time for gaming because every time you would blink, something newer and better was coming on the horizon.

But this also left no room for new concepts to breathe. If you were making hardware, you just kept making the same hardware but better. Gamers were desperate to get the next thing because the newest games took huge advantage of those shiny, fresh video cards. But that started to shift around 2016.

While graphics were still improving, the rate of improvement began to slow down. Suddenly, everyone that had an Nvidia GTX 1060 was no longer looking around for what was next. Most new games still ran at 60 frames per second at 1080p on a GTX 1060 in 2017 and then 2018.

Even today as I write this, you don’t need something much more powerful than a GTX 1060 to run games at 1080p. Why did this happen? Well, the limits on

development changed. In the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, hardware was the limitation on what software could do. And then hardware and game engines reached a certain level where the limitations came down to how much time and money a studio has.

And it turns out that publishers aren't exactly going to spend extra cash on their games to force customers to upgrade their hardware. In fact, developers are thrilled that the rush to upgrade has slowed down. This means more people have PCs that can run their games.

This put hardware makers into something of a panic mode. They needed something to drive a need for more powerful hardware. At the Consumer Electronics Show and Electronic Entertainment Expo in 2017 and 2018, you could see some of this desperation leading to creativity. In particular, companies like Intel were showing off concept laptops that had extra screens. Sometimes those displays were above the laptop, and in some other instances, they even folded out of the main panel.

The point of the secondary displays on laptops was to add more pixels. The mobile CPUs and GPUs coming out at this time were total overkill for 1080p and even 1440p laptops. But at the same time, no one was asking for a 4K notebook that wouldn't really look that much sharper but would decimate your battery.

While Intel was hoping to find a way to bolt extra, unnecessary pixels onto existing hardware, Nvidia was coming up with a plan to get developers back on board with new graphics cards: ray tracing. Computer-graphics scientists have described real-time ray tracing as a holy grail for literally decades. The idea is that instead of forcing an artist to design lighting for every single scene in a game, they could simply place lights in an environment and then the graphics engine could simulate the real-world behaviour of those photon rays.

The thing about ray tracing is that it works. It *is* the future, but it's also just not quite as exciting for gamers because developers got really skilled at faking many of ray tracing's features. So a ray-traced game often ends up looking a lot like its non-ray-traced version but with a worse framerate. Because remember, ray tracing is about creating a technology that would push everyone to pick up new video cards.

While ray tracing works, it still didn't create a rush on new GPUs to replace all those old GTX 1060s. Not enough games take advantage of the technology, and those that do look great even with ray tracing turned off. This forced hardware manufacturers to reexamine the question: how do we create new graphics products that get consumers excited? The answer is obvious when you see it. Instead of making bigger, more powerful graphics cards, what if you went the other way and made something smaller and more efficient?

That is the trend that Intel and, especially, AMD have started chasing in the last few years. Zen 2 CPUs and RDNA GPUs began popping up in laptops from brands that had always previously used Intel and Nvidia. And the

results were nearly as powerful in terms of performance but with significant gains to battery life and cooling performance.

At this point, the end result was obvious to most of us who were paying attention: someone is going to make a powerful gaming handheld. That speculation, as it usually does, aimed squarely at console manufacturers like Microsoft and Sony. Wouldn't they want a handheld companion for their new consoles? The Switch, after all, was already a global phenomenon. After the PlayStation Portable and PlayStation Vita, however, Sony no longer has a lot of faith in handhelds. And Microsoft's portable plans involve streaming games from the cloud to your phone.

The idea didn't die, though. Instead, ingenuity and risk-taking simply shifted from gaming's old guard to a new crop of manufacturers and designers in China. Companies like Ayaneo and GPD began experimenting with powerful handheld computers. And while these devices were expensive, they weren't extravagantly overpriced. And as the AMD and Intel hardware inside these devices kept improving, GPD and Ayaneo seemed on the cusp of taking over the world.

What no one knew was that Valve anticipated all of this.

The company that began by dabbling in hardware with Steam Machines had turned into a force in the VR space. Many consider Valve's Index the top-of-the-line when it comes to head-mounted displays. And the company clearly spotted an opportunity during that graphical plateau in the late twenty-teens.

The difference between Valve and those Chinese startups, however, is scale and incentive. Valve could get into a room with AMD and demand to hear about its most cutting-edge tech. And that's what it did. Gabe Newell got on the proverbial horn with AMD's Lisa Su and said, "Hey, make us a portable version of the hardware that you're making for Xbox Series X/S and PlayStation 5." And AMD happily obliged because it had already spent years miniaturising that tech for laptops.

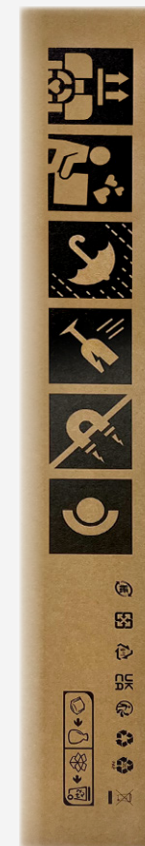
And because Valve has Steam, the most powerful profit-generation platform in the history of gaming, it can afford to sell the Steam Deck at that aforementioned “painful” price.

Of course, the real reason the Steam Deck exists is because of you. The Steam Deck was inevitable because we kept demanding it. Valve just recognised it and capitalised on it. From those primitive days in the '80s with the grayscale Game Boy, we knew that there was something special about holding our games. *Pokémon* was a global mega phenomenon due in large part to the fact that kids could keep it away from the rest of the world. It felt like it belonged to you more when your parents couldn't get between you and the TV screen. It's a secret between the game and yourself. It's an intimate relationship, and therefore it was always going to be the natural endpoint of gaming hardware.

We were never going to give up our Game Boys and move on permanently to fixed gaming on a monitor or a television. Instead, we were always going to wait for the console and PC experience to meet us by turning into a Game Boy.

To those of you reading this, I know this is painfully obvious. “That game would be great on Switch” is practically our unofficial motto. It’s almost worthy of tears that our time has arrived. In the coming years, it’s likely that gaming will bend more toward devices like the Steam Deck. And it’s also likely that many of those systems will run Valve’s custom SteamOS, which puts the Steam store front and centre. Valve will likely continue to dominate with massive profits from game sales.

But I think the reality is that it will continue to be us, the handheld gamers, who come out on top. On a bean bag in the corner, on the bus to work, or on a lounge chair on vacation, we demanded that gaming find a way to fit into our lives, and the universe finally let its grip on the third law of thermodynamics loosen just enough to relent and give us what we want. That is the Steam Deck, and it's everything we ever wanted.

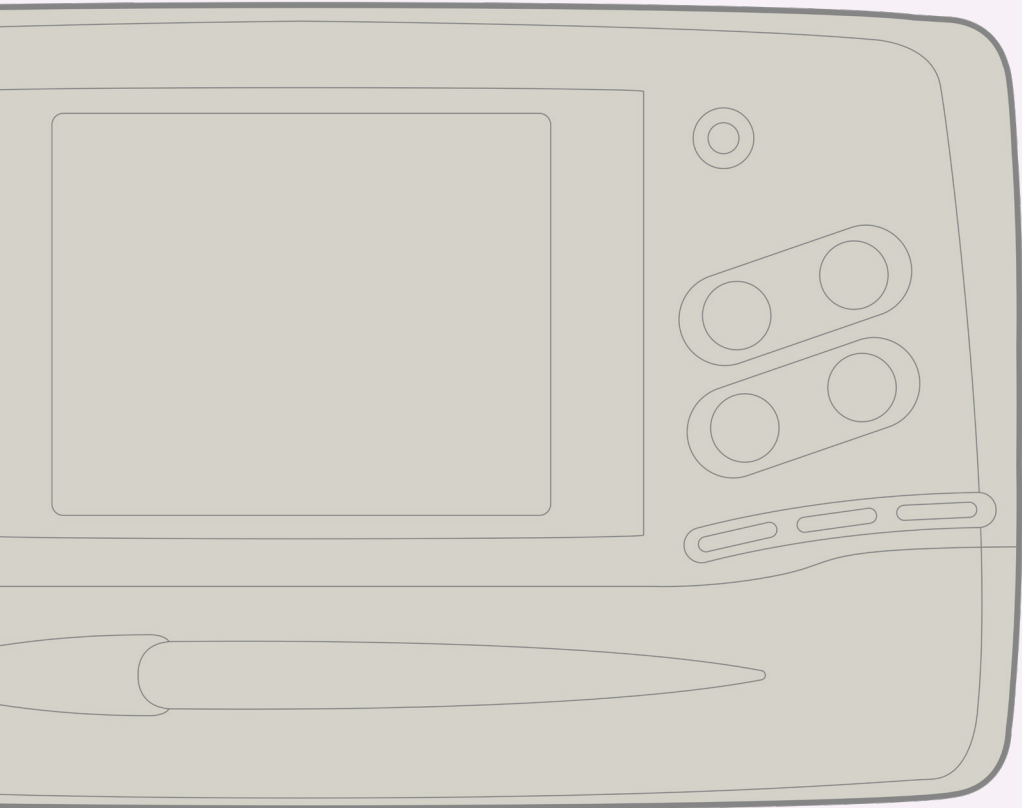


Constant Companion

Notice something familiar on the Steam Deck packaging? Yep, that's the Companion Cube! Speaking of which, a special game was created to show off the features of the Steam Deck called Aperture Desk Job, set in the Portal universe. It's not Portal 3, but it's better than being a potato, right?

Game.com

Manufacturer	Tiger Electronics		
CPU	10 MHz Sharp SM8521		
Display	200 x 160px 4 bit greyscale		
Price	US	\$69.95	
	UK	£79.99	



Game Com Active.

These are the words spoken when powering on the Tiger Game.com, and were enough to elicit a small “whoa!” from the 11-year-olds fully immersed in the hype. This was a handheld system with new ideas, like a touch-screen and two cartridge slots, along with big name games like *Resident Evil 2* and *Mortal Kombat*. And you could go online! On the *internet*! This was no Game Boy — it was a handheld for grown ups, or at least for the kids excited at the idea of being a ‘Grown Up™’.

The Tiger Game.com (pronounced simply ‘Game Com’, as the system start up reinforces verbally) released on September 12th, 1997, born as a direct competitor to Nintendo’s Game Boy. It aimed to do more than its rival though; sure it had a monochromatic screen, but, in an industry first, it was touch enabled. It came complete with lifestyle apps like a calculator, calendar, and phone book. There was even *Solitaire* built in, like a real computer — all for \$69 in the US and £79 in the UK.

The biggest on-the-box selling point, however, was internet functionality, making it the first handheld gaming device to have online access. The sold-separately internet cartridge (coupled with an also sold-separately 14.4kb modem) allowed players to go online, browsing text-based websites and e-mail from the palm of their hand. You could even go to game.com on your Game.com to upload high scores from your game (dot com).

Like a lot of games marketing in the era, the Game.com’s commercials latched onto the idea of “insult the viewer into buying our thing”. Set in a faux-E3 press conference, the spokesman berated attendees (and the commercial’s viewers) by branding them a “moron” and exclaiming “it plays more games than you idiots have brain cells”. It was the parlance of the time, an era where publishers had open disdain for the very person buying their games.

And what a line-up of games! While the Game.com’s stable of 20 games seemed small at first blush, the amount of heavy hitters was staggering: titles like *Mortal Kombat Trilogy* and *Duke Nukem 3D* brought big experiences (and names) to Tiger’s handheld. Games like *Wheel of Fortune*, *Scrabble*, and *Frogger* were great on-the-go concepts for a more casual crowd. Even Sega had some reps with *Fighters Megamix* and *Sonic Jam*, over a year before *Sonic Pocket* released on the Neo Geo Pocket.

And, of course, *Resident Evil 2*. Released in November 1998, *Resident Evil 2* was the proverbial system seller for Game.com, bringing a 2D version of Leon’s campaign to the little handheld. It was impressive, if only fleetingly — poor controls and the Game.com’s screen marred most of the enjoyment to be had, resulting in more of an odd curio than a game that holds up to modern sensibilities. In the pantheon of games, however, *RE2* marked two firsts for the series; the first T-rated title in the franchise, and, more importantly, the first handheld *Resident Evil* game, preceding Game Boy Color’s *Resident Evil Gaiden* by nearly two years.

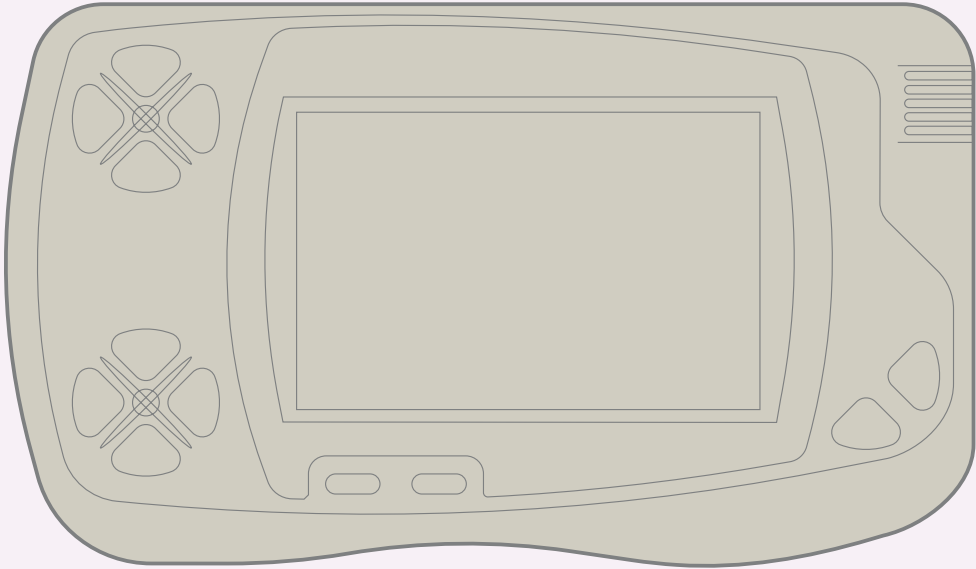
The secret best Game.com title, however, was with us all along: *Lights Out*, the pack-in launch title and adaptation of Tiger’s *Lights Out* electronic game. A simple 5x5 grid puzzle game where players tap to clear all lights on screen, *Lights Out* perfectly realized the strength of Game.com’s portability and touchscreen — all for the price of, well, technically nothing.

Lights Out, both in title and playability, revealed the core issue with the Game.com, however — the screen. The Game.com’s monochromatic screen rendered games a blurry mess, exacerbated by the poor quality and lack of a backlight. Tiger sought to address this with the Game.com Pocket Pro, a 1999 revision that reduced the handheld’s size and, most crucially, added backlight functionality at a price point of just \$29.99. It ultimately proved too little too late: the Game.com was discontinued in 2000, after selling 300,000 total systems.

However, for a brief three years you’d be forgiven if you overlooked the system’s flaws, if only to catch a glimpse of the future of what handheld games could be. The Game.com’s missteps were numerous, rooted in big ideas without practicality. It wasn’t the best, but in many ways, it was the first. Game.com’s legacy in handheld history is a momentary cul-de-sac of things to come, a system with functionality before its time — a touchscreen handheld for games, apps, and INTERNET! It unfortunately just happened to not execute any of these features particularly well. It’s the little handheld that could, but couldn’t, and we’re all the better for it trying in the first place. Sunrise, sunset. *Lights Out*, lights out.



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Resident Evil 2
1998



WonderSwan

Manufacturer	Bandai
CPU	NEC V30 MZ
Display	2.49-inch, 224 x 144
Price	JP ¥4,800

Developed by Gunpei Yokoi and former Nintendo R&D1 members responsible for handhelds like the Game Boy (1989) and the Gameboy Pocket (1996), the WonderSwan was Bandai’s foray into the handheld market; competing against Nintendo’s handheld dominance, and the then struggling SNK and its Neo Geo Pocket offering. Armed with a 16-bit NEC CPU, and a monochrome LCD display sporting eight shades of grey, the first hardware iteration made a reasonable splash in Japan, requiring only one AA battery for up to 40 hours of use.

After the failure of the Virtual Boy at Nintendo, Gunpei Yokoi left to create Koto Laboratory in 1996, where he and his team would take some of the then brooding concepts for the next generation and work with Bandai to create something they considered truly special. A year after founding Koto Labs, however, Gunpei Yokoi would tragically die in a devastating accident. Having passed down the design ethos and work ethic to his crew in charge of the project, the first version of the WonderSwan would be shown in 1998, and later released in 1999 alongside the launch title lovingly named *Gunpey* in the design lab founder’s honour.

The handheld would feature exclusive remakes of *Final Fantasy*, its direct sequel *Final Fantasy II*, and the fourth story in the long running franchise *Final Fantasy IV* (when the later hardware revision the WonderSwan Color was released in December of 2000), as well as versions of Square’s *Saga* and *Front Mission* games. Titles in the *Mega Man* series by Namco (licenced from Capcom), Bandai’s future merger partner, along with their mascot-led platformer *Klonoa*, and a highly regarded version of *Tetris*, would also help to fill out the library for the fledgling console. Even the highly regarded Arc System Works and its fighting game franchise *Guilty Gear* would make an appearance, with an attachable D-pad thumb rocker to make some of the moves easier to pull off with the WonderSwan’s directional buttons. Indie titles like *Judgement Silversword*, developed on the WonderWitch Development Platform for indie devs, would take advantage of WonderSwan’s ability to play in vertical orientation (otherwise known as Tate, pronounced tah-tay) and is one of the most rare and expensive games for the system.

Its use of add-ons and attachments allowed for games in the much-beloved, though often understated, *Digimon* series to connect with their *Tamagotchi*-like virtual pet counterparts for trading and battling. The WonderSwan also sported the ability to go online to check email and integrated some features of internet connectivity into future *Digimon* titles to trade and battle the creatures, via the WonderGate peripheral. On top of this, the WonderWave allowed transfer and interconnectivity features with the Sony PocketStation for Bandai’s PlayStation *Digimon* games.

A small and budding indie and homebrew development scene even spawned around WonderSwan with the release of the aforementioned WonderWitch, a cart and software combination that allowed development of games on personal computers by connecting the PC to a WonderSwan cart, and actually flashing games to it in order to test them on real hardware. This is very similar to the flash cartridge which would go on to be released decades later for fans to



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WSC Final Fantasy Edition
2000

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WS Soda Blue
1999

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WS CoroCoro Cammo Edition
1999

be able to load up ROMs themselves, alongside many other mods to keep the console alive well beyond its discontinuation in 2003.

Though exclusively a Japanese release, Western interest has steadily climbed in the 2010s and 2020s, and reverence for the potential Game Boy competitor has had fans working to bring to light the wonders Koto Labs and Bandai wished they could have shared with the whole world. People, such as Twitter user @translatorWS, are actively working to translate games for WonderSwan into English. Fans of Mr. Yokoi’s work, and of the many fantastic and highly rated titles from some of the best Japanese development studios at the time, will continue to ensure that the system will not soon be forgotten.

The WonderSwan, though selling approximately 3.5 million units during its lifetime, would unfortunately not be a long-term viable project for Bandai financially. There was a final hardware revision in the form of the SwanCrystal in 2002, and although it boasted an improved screen, its higher price and reduced play time did nothing to turn the tide. Gunpei Yokoi’s lasting legacy, his Swan song, would therefore sail off quietly into gaming history — revered, loved, and never forgotten by its legion of fans.

- 340
Mr. Driller
2001
- 341
Judgement Silversword: Rebirth Edition
2004
- 342
Dicing Knight
2004



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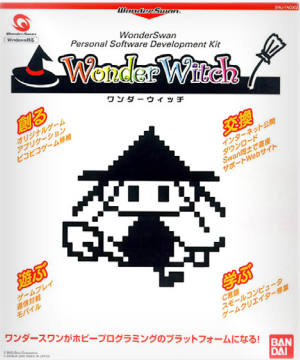


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- 343
Clock Tower
1999
- 345
Klonoa: Moonlight Museum
1999

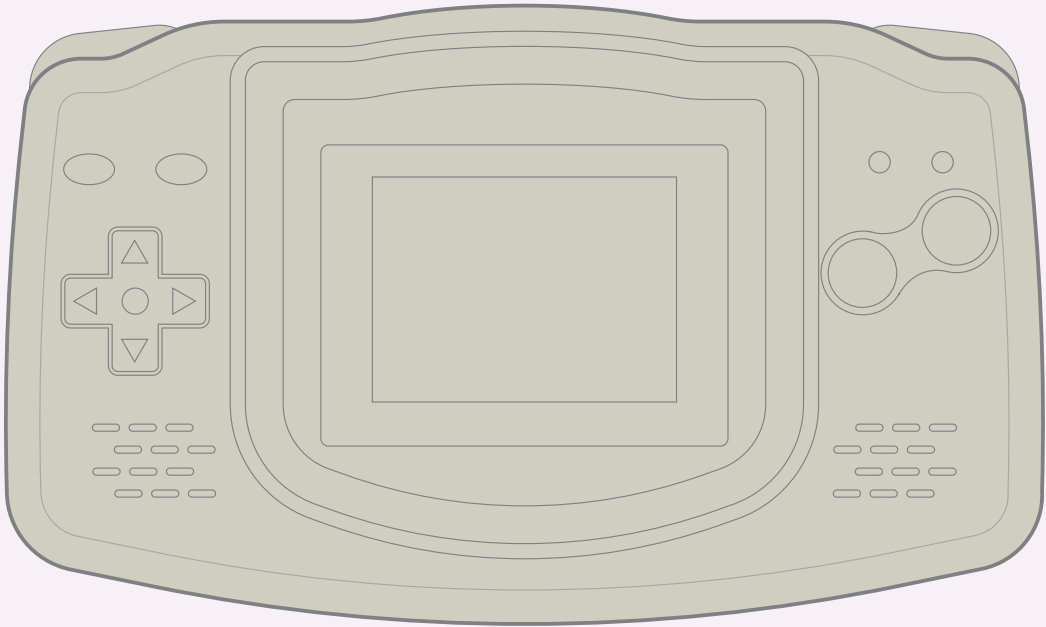


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WonderWitch
2000
- 346
Rhyme Rider Kerorican
2000



GameKing

Manufacturer	Timetop
CPU	65C02 CPU @ 6MHz
Display	LCD 48 x 32px
Price	US \$20.00

2003 was a dark time. The world had suffered through disappointing *Terminator* and *Matrix* sequels and was in dire need of distraction. Timetop, a snappily titled division of the less snappily titled Guangzhou Daidaixing Electronics Tech Co. Ltd, had a clear vision of what the world needed: a new handheld console with a screen resolution one-fifteenth that of the 14-year-old Nintendo Game Boy. And for some reason nobody stopped them from making that vision a reality.

Enter the GameKing, the self-appointed royalty of handheld video games consoles! Available in a range of colours with a design suspiciously similar to the original Nintendo Game Boy Advance model, it offered a selection of over 30 games available on separate cartridges. They're nearly all simplified clones of NES games, and some are identical copies of other GameKing games with the graphics and sound changed, but there are definitely over 30 of them! The cartridges themselves are a total rip-off of the original Game Boy cartridges with a weird triangular bump to stop you inserting them backwards.

The first thing that becomes apparent when you turn the unit on is that you can't really see anything on the screen, which is a fairly major problem right out of the gate. The low contrast dot matrix LCD display needs a powerful light source shining on it before anything is clearly visible, and then it needs to be at a specific angle to avoid the screen being completely obscured by glare. There is a contrast wheel on the unit which you will immediately crank up to maximum and forget about. If you've had experience trying to play an original Game Boy Advance under artificial light, imagine that but three times worse. The GameKing was apparently only designed for play on the fictional twin-sunned planet of Tatooine.

Anyway, once you've hooked up your custom 3000 lumen multi-refraction lighting rig you can then see just how amazingly low resolution the screen is. The original Game Boy was 160x144 pixels — the GameKing is just 48x32. A graphing calculator from the 1990s has four times the resolution. As you can imagine, this severely limits gameplay. The display is monochrome and screen elements can be one of four shades of grey, although the lightest shade is mostly invisible due to the screen tech.

The GameKing's audio is surprisingly impressive. The games seem to exclusively use sampled sounds rather than the beepy chip noises you would expect from this kind of machine. The downside is that very little data could be stored on the game cartridges and samples take up a lot of space, so whilst every game has digitised background music, it mostly consists of very short loops which quickly start to drive you mad. Another downside is that several games have music recorded directly from NES titles, effectively storing chip music in the most inefficient manner possible. A 3.5mm headphone socket sits on top of the unit, but amazingly it's not actually for headphones — it's a port for a DC power supply! Both the labelling on the GameKing and the manual itself are unclear, so I can only assume Timetop was trying to deliberately confuse headphone users.

The console design, game concepts, and music aren't the only things that were... er... 'liberated' from other places. Timetop played so fast and loose with copyright that I'm not entirely sure they understood the concept. Much of the art on the game boxes was taken from existing games and, in a particularly committed act of plagiarism, even directly from artist's online portfolios.

But, of course, a console lives or dies by its games. And the GameKing can play all your favourite classic titles like *Dracula Zone*, *Clever Hawk*, and *Legion Force*! Okay, I made up one of those. Bet you can't tell which one without looking it up though.

The games tend to be fairly playable, but few will hold your attention for more than a few minutes. Let's look at a few examples...

DRIFTER

Drifter is one of the three games built into the GameKing, and is basically a clone of *Wonder Boy* (AKA *Adventure Island*). Every GameKing game has a poorly translated plot synopsis called a 'game brief' printed both on the back of the box and on a little instruction leaflet. *Drifter* offers the following epic backstory:

"According to the recording of history, there is an island named 'Gold Island' on the Pacific Ocean, storing the enormous treasures. So the tramp drives the ship to seek the island alone. After long-term vagrancy, the tramp found the island eventually. But they are facing various monsters and obstacles on the island."

Nobody enjoys being a vagrant long-term, so I was very motivated to help the tramp that stars in *Drifter*. Also, the tramp is a cute mouse for some reason.

The game is a surprisingly faithful clone of *Wonder Boy*. You run from left to right, your energy constantly depleting, and you have to pick up fruit to restore it. You leap over enemies and stumble on rocks just as in the original, and can pick up a weird boomerang thing which acts exactly like the stone axe. Even the temporary invincibility shield made it in, although it's brilliantly referred to as the 'antiabrasion layer' in the manual. The only missing feature is the skateboard which allows you to zoom along the levels, although instead you can upgrade the boomerang thing to a rocket launcher and blow the crap out of the rocks. Clearly the *Drifter* mouse tramp is less of a sportsman than *Wonder Boy*.

The good news is that *Drifter* plays very well, even with the screen resolution limiting you to a tiny viewport so you can't see very far ahead. The action is smooth, the controls are responsive, and it's fun to balance the need to quickly run through the levels with the need to hang back and avoid obstacles. The bad news is that the music — a twelve second loop of the classic 'Vampire Killer' theme from *Castlevania* — will drive you mad after about three minutes, so turning the volume down to zero is a necessity.

POPPER

“In 2068, the evil’s strength turns strong gradually, and the wild ambition of dominating the earth of is reliving. Nanny is the leader of the justice. So the evil treat Nanny as enemy and rob his sister Honny. Nanny slip into the evil and take action to save Honny...”

Well, that’s clearly the story of a mighty hero battling against the forces of sister-kidnapping evil. This is backed up by the cover art which is taken directly from the Play-Station 2 *Ghosts ‘n Goblins* spin-off *Maximo vs. Army of Zin*, showing the hulking protagonist wielding a massive sword. This makes it all the more surprising when you start the game and discover it’s a *Bomberman* knock-off.

An intro animation shows a clown — presumably Nanny — running down a road and hurling a bomb into the camera. Although the tiny in-game sprite looks more like a crown with legs, so I’ve got no real idea what Nanny is other than “the leader of the justice”.

The game is very much a single-player *Bomberman* experience, mostly copied from the NES version from 1985. You lay timed bombs around a grid to destroy enemies and clear the rocks that get in your way, finding a variety of power-ups as you go. These make your bombs more powerful, allow you to drop more of them at once, and enable the ability to remotely detonate them amongst other things.

Playing *Popper* is mostly a positive experience. It’s as precise and fluid as a *Bomberman* game needs to be, and as always it’s fun to plan the downfall of the enemies whilst keeping yourself safely away from your own explosions. It can take a little while to get going as the power-ups are quite sparse in the first couple of levels, but you’ll soon have enough explosive power to blow half the level away.

The GameKing’s ultra-low screen resolution is a real problem with *Popper*. The overhead view only shows about a quarter as many tiles as the NES version, so it’s much easier to run into an enemy by accident. A less severe problem is the Curse of *Bomberman* — the need to blow up rocks to find a randomly hidden exit before you can proceed to the next level. It’s boring, challenge-free, and stops the pace of the game dead if you didn’t chance across it whilst killing enemies. It’s less of a chore when you’re fully powered up, but in the early levels you can spend an age clearing every block from the level if you’re unlucky.

The in-game music is a six second loop of the jaunty title theme to the Tengen version of *Tetris* for the NES. It is exactly as annoying as that sounds.

But the biggest flaw with *Popper* is, by a country mile, its absolute redundancy. There is no need for this game to exist, let alone be sold on a separate cartridge. It’s an exact clone of the existing GameKing game *Miner* (AKA *Mine Battle*) with different graphics and sound... And *Miner* is one of the three games built into every single GameKing console, so everyone had it already!

DUCK MAN

“On xx month xx date, 2xxx, a flock of mysterious criminals sacked xx city, loot vast precious stones and the other treasure. After verified, proved that is a named F.W mysterious criminal group did. Justicial soul Duck Man was given orders to enter into the criminal group area, to destroy it and take back all of the precious stones and treasure which had been stolen.”

I have no idea why the game brief for *Duck Man* is so vague about the location and time of the story’s events. Possibly, it had the details redacted to protect his true identity as a “justicial soul”.

The cover of *Duck Man* shows a painting that looks remarkably like Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix Resurrections*, which is odd as the game was released 18 years before the film. However, it has nothing to do with the game’s content, which becomes obvious when the title screen displays a picture of *Darkwing Duck*. Because this is actually a clone of — you guessed it — *Darkwing Duck* for the NES! Duck Man runs around shooting enemies, jumping between hooks, and hanging off platforms much like the Nintendo original. The character sprite seems to be a more generic cartoonish duck than Darkwing, although to be honest he looks more like a diseased hedgehog wearing a tengu mask anyway.

Duck Man takes place across three fairly short stages — a bridge, a city centre, and a sewer, the last of which is wonderfully called the ‘Offal Channel’ in the instructions. This brevity isn’t uncommon for a GameKing game, presumably as most of the cartridge space has been taken up by sampled recordings from other games. (Dull technical note: The stages are stored as bitmaps which is a very inefficient way of storing level data, which doesn’t help matters).

Again, the gameplay is fluid and the controls are responsive, so it’s easy enough to get Duck Man to leap around the Offal Channel. Deadly drops off the bottom of the level are annoying as it’s so difficult to see them coming due to the low resolution, but that’s not a huge problem. What is a huge problem is how cripplingy boring the game is.

You need to collect a certain number of gems to allow a key to spawn, which lets you progress to the next level. But these precious shiny rocks spawn very rarely from dead enemies. You have to run back and forth, allowing enemies to respawn so you can keep killing them over and over to get the gems. You need progressively more gems on each level, to the extent that I spent a solid ten minutes tediously grinding on level 3 before giving up as it felt like my brain was going to escape from my skull.

The background music loop is five incredibly annoying seconds of a simple bass line. I’m beginning to wonder if removing the speaker from the GameKing would have ultimately been an upgrade.

FURTHER GAMEKINGS

Spurred on by epic tales of justicial souls and long-term vagrancy, Timetop released the GameKing II a couple of years after the original unit. It’s loosely modelled after a Sony PlayStation Portable, with a massive hideous bezel surrounding its tiny screen. The actual workings of the machine are identical to the original GameKing, so it uses the same cartridges and plays the same games, although the D-pad isn’t quite as good. There is one major addition though — front light LEDs! Whilst not the greatest way to light a screen, it’s obviously an immense improvement over no lights at all. At last you could actually see your GameKing games clearly! Or at least you could if it wasn’t for a particularly egregious design choice.

The GameKing II models all seem to have a permanent static background picture, presumably designed to give the illusion of colour. All it actually does is limit the effect of the front lights and make the screen less clear. Fortunately, the picture overlay is easily removable — I took it out of my unit and the screen clarity was vastly improved.

Intriguingly, the GameKing hardware was also used in a variety of one-off handheld consoles which could only play built-in games. These were often bizarrely designed, looking like weird little laptops or forcing game selection via swiping barely-functional fake credit cards.

Timetop did go on to produce a GameKing III, but it only had a limited release. It features a colour screen, full backwards compatibility with previous GameKing cartridges, and very few actual dedicated games. Whilst the colour screen is a bit of an ugly mess, it is at least backlit so you can see the games clearly for the first time. But you can’t really play them as the directional pad is so bad. Oh well.

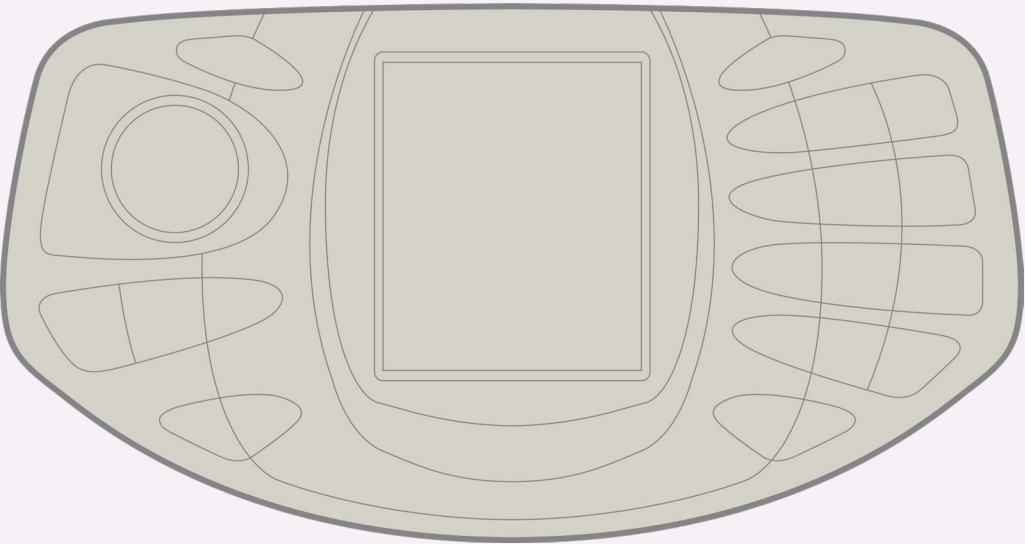
The GameKing is a real oddity. It feels like a cheap, cut-down console made to go up against the original Game Boy, except that it wasn’t released until 14 years later, and was actually contemporaneous with the Nintendo DS! It’s like it fell through a time warp or escaped from another dimension. The low resolution and digitised audio make the games immediately recognisable, and they’re often more imaginative than those found on the Supervision or Mega Duck. It’s a unique system that’s fun to collect for, but you really need a GameKing II with the awful background overlay removed to get the most from the games.

Copy Cat

Resembling a pack of playing cards more than a video game box, the packaging for GameKing title Duck Man is certainly... unique. Does the game logo look familiar at all? That's because it's the top half of the Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance logo!



N-Gage		
Manufacturer	Nokia	
CPU	ARM920T @ 104 MHz	
OS	Symbian OS 6.1 [Series 60]	
Price	US	\$299.99
	UK	£299.99



Anticipation ran high as we opened the point of sale delivery on October 6th, 2003. Inside three boxes would be the means of advertising the Nokia N-Gage, hitting the streets the next day. After extracting the usual tat (posters, key-rings, pens, and bottle openers), we reached the peak of Nokia’s marketing prowess, something to demonstrate the true power of the N-Gage and its games: a pair of... beach towels??? Not one piece of marketing material mentioned games, which should have been the first warning sign. However, as an administrator at a now defunct phone retailer, and a total geek, it was easy for me to get caught up in the hype of the moment. Both myself and another colleague were eager to buy into Nokia’s vision.

Launch day. Excitement hit fever levels (for two of us anyway) as the tote box was unsealed, revealing just two handsets. Not to worry, we thought, we’ll buy ours when we get more in. But where were the games? They were in another box that the driver had missed and they were now 30 miles away! After a phone call and an hour’s wait, two copies apiece of *Tomb Raider* and *Pandemonium* arrived. Not the full launch range, and a sure sign of future software supply issues. Disappointingly, by 4 pm, no walk-in customers had wanted the N-Gage dream and we snaffled those two units, each signing £30 per month contracts for the privilege.

Overall, the launch of the N-Gage wasn’t the success Nokia envisaged. It was a pricey sim-free handset, and obtaining one via a mobile phone contract excluded those under 18. Day one sales were weak, with a reported 5,000 in the US and between 500 and 800 in the UK — not exactly promising. It probably didn’t help that the device was too much phone and not enough games console. Essentially a Series 60 device, the screen wasn’t optimised at all for gaming. You had to hold it on its side to make calls, part of the control pad consisted of a standard numerical keypad, and you had to remove the battery to change cartridges. Think more mid-level executive brain melt than dedicated assault on the handheld market.

Having sold out, we were soon resupplied but never received any demo handsets, which meant using our own to sell the vision. That ended after more than one prospective customer dropped mine and, on one occasion, it was handed to a child who didn’t appreciate it and promptly launched it across the shop floor! Network reps were cool on the idea too, one questioning their additional revenue stream if people just used it as a games machine, because they sure weren’t going to use it as a phone. The merchandise slowly vanished (the bottle openers were very popular), as did the beach towels (don’t look at me, it was my day off!), but sales of N-Gage handsets themselves remained dire. The same went for the games. Although Nokia released around 60 titles throughout the N-Gage’s life, you’d never tell from the stock we received. *Rayman*, *Sonic N*, and *Super Monkey Ball* squatted in the sales rack, as only the two of us with N-Gages ever bought the software from our store. That explained the three copies per title maximum that the store maintained, even with new releases.

Undeterred, Nokia doubled down on the concept with

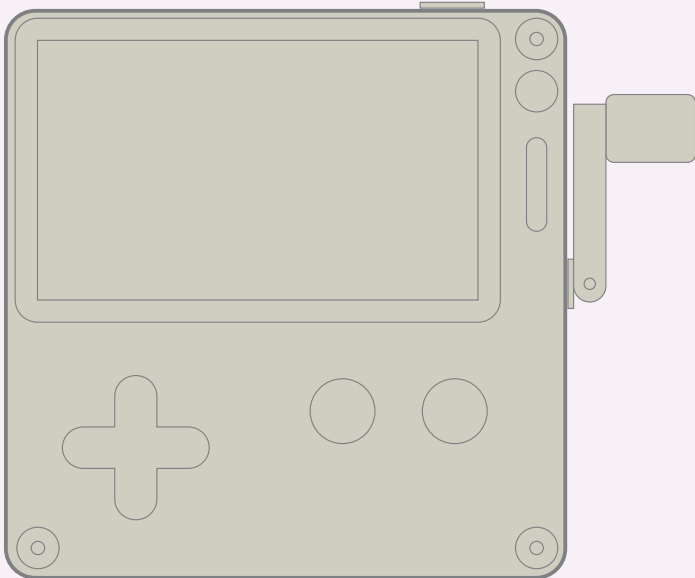
the N-Gage QD in May 2004. The store received two at launch, one of which I bought to replace my repeatedly bounced original. I liked it — easier to use for calls, the buttons were nicer too, and the cartridge slot was thankfully external now. But there were still very few games and the un-changed screen format ruined many a title — *Pathway to Glory*, *Red Faction*, and the half-decent *Ashen* all suffered. Sales remained poor.

It couldn’t last, and Nokia decided to abandon the hardware side of its business in 2006. That wasn’t the last hurrah as far as retail went though. About two months after the last title was released, we received six refurbished original N-Gages, supplied with pay-as-you-go sim cards, retailing at £50 each. Even at that low price, they took some getting rid of. One customer bought three for ‘collector’s purposes’. We were just happy to see the back of them.

The N-Gage was an expensive folly whose initial 6 to 9 million sales projections were laughable, particularly as it wasn’t a good games machine. I never regretted buying either model but, after a couple of years of use, I have an inkling that someone got more use out of those beach towels than I ever did from my N-Gage.



348
Sonic N
2003



Playdate	
Manufacturer	Panic Inc.
CPU	STMicroelectronics @ 180 MHz
Display	2.7-inch, 400 × 240
Price	US \$179.00

It’s 2019, and your new issue of Edge magazine has been posted through the letter box. To your amazement you see a square, miniature handheld in bright yellow with what looks like a Lego brick hanging off the side. Confused, you rub your eyes and soon figure out that this handheld actually has a crank attached to it.

A crank? What the heck would that be used for?! Perhaps it could recharge the battery like those cheap flashlights? Nope, guess again! Ah, you got it. It’s a control input! Souljaboy must be jealous right now, especially after the failed launch of the TRDR Pocket — you should have “cranked dat”, buddy!

Playdate was built by a company called Panic, who are based in the United States and have had a history of creating software and publishing popular video games such as *Firewatch* and *Untitled Goose Game*. But the Playdate is their first time developing a piece of hardware for the handheld community, and boy oh boy have they created something incredible.

The name Playdate comes from the idea of bringing games to the device every week — like a subscription, only with no additional cost outside of the device itself — and the games will automatically land in your library on release days via the built-in WiFi.

The crank itself is of superb quality, and allows you to play games like never before. Panic teamed up with a bunch of incredibly talented developers to produce games exclusively for the device, and they really made full use of the crank throughout development. For example, a popular game on the Playdate called *Whitewater Wipeout* uses the crank to spin the on-screen surfer in order to increase points. It’s also a game that took inspiration from the classic *California Games* on the Atari Lynx back in 1989.

Another game uses the crank to control an elevator that picks up penguins and takes them to the correct floor. The faster you crank, the quicker you drop off the penguins, and the faster they want to get in. I constantly find myself getting mesmerised by the way the crank makes the gaming experience far more physical than any other handheld I have tested, making it one of the most physically engaging handhelds in this book.

The screen is also incredibly unique, especially for a handheld released in 2022. The screen is a 1-bit super reflective LCD which looks very similar to e-paper displays. However, unlike the latest Amazon Kindle devices, there is no backlight — but this is for good reason. Panic wanted incredible battery life, so good in fact that it could be in an ‘always on’ sleep mode that displays the time for up to 14 days.

The lack of a backlight is admittedly annoying at times, but it adds to the handheld’s uniqueness. It gives you this sense of urgency to play on it during the day while the sun is out, and I found myself sad in the evening when I couldn’t play on it (unless I was directly under a light source). It’s certainly an odd choice from Panic, and a backlit option would have been far more successful, but it’s not a big enough problem for it to take away from the cuteness and

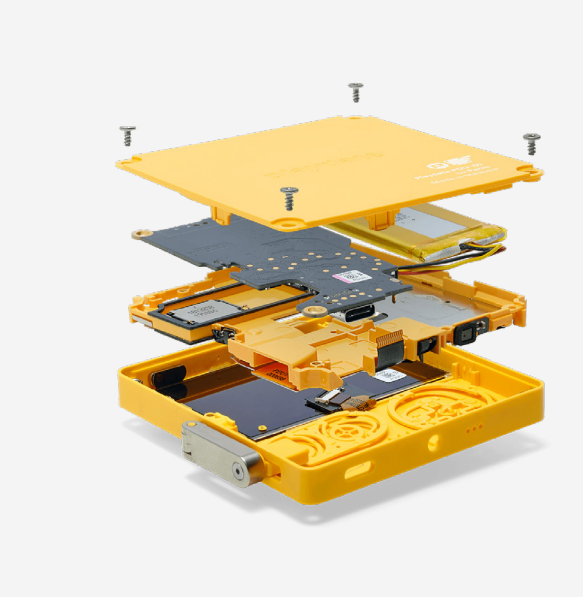
overall love I have for this device. Besides, perhaps it’ll inspire the resurgence of the worm light!

In an age when handhelds have been growing in size, featuring more processing power and tackling larger and larger games, many would argue it was not smart to launch the Playdate in such a time — I would argue otherwise. It was the perfect time for something fresh and unique.

The Playdate stood out like a sore thumb, and even though it took years to create and the team behind it had no idea what the handheld scene would look like by the time they finished development, it got the attention it deserved. Its success goes to show how much the handheld market is evolving over time, even for indie-based hardware that features a crank in order to play your games.

Panic produced a marvellous little device that proves that handhelds in any form can flourish if produced and marketed correctly. It may not have the best screen, or the best ergonomics, or the best games lineup, but it is so different that it’s hard not to pick it up and enjoy it.

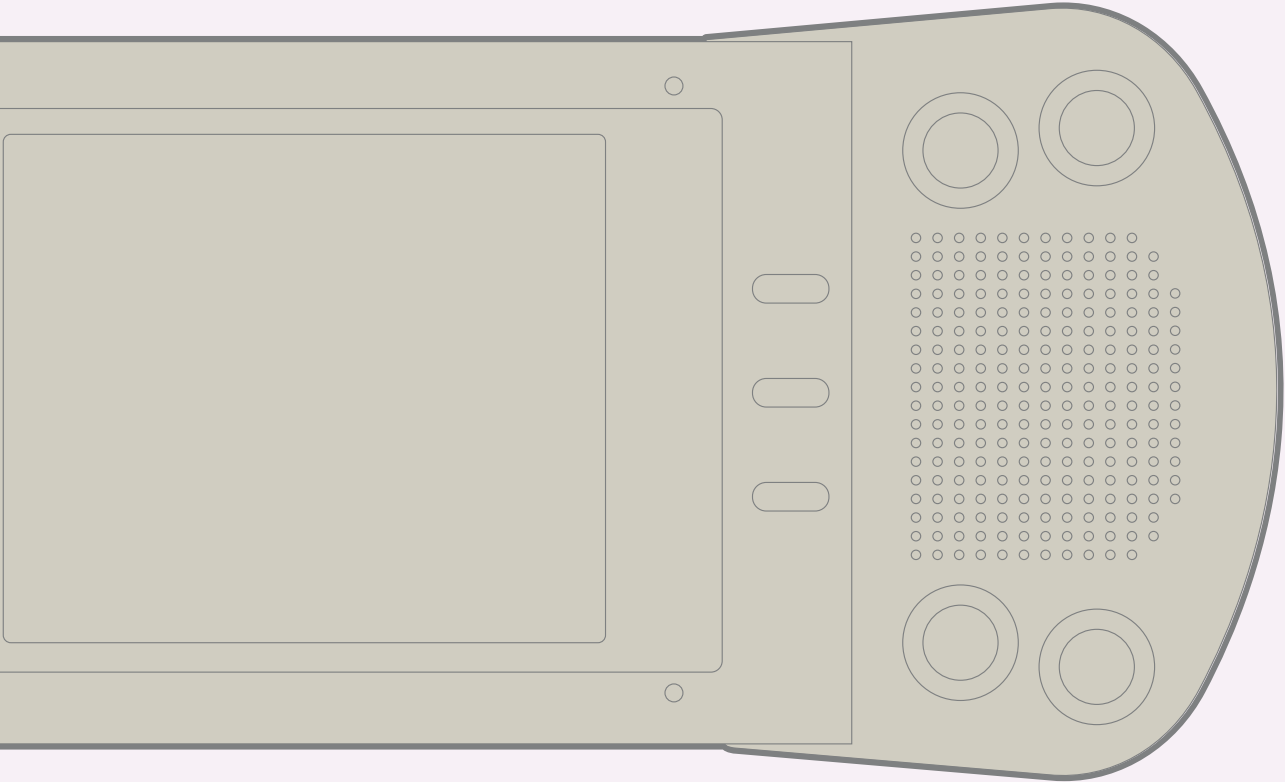
Plus the ever-growing library makes for a nice surprise every time you turn it on — and that’s not even mentioning the free development software and ability to side-load additional games. Panic timed game launches perfectly too, as just when you think you’re ready to move on to another handheld, wait... a new game — for free? You shouldn’t have, but I don’t mind if I do. Keep those seasons coming!



Sideload Dat!

Using the PlayDate SDK, curious developers can make their very own games and programs for the console. Those with less experience can even use the click-and-place Pulp program to come up with their own creations! Players can sideload these by connecting the device up to a computer.

Atari Lynx	
Manufacturer	Atari Corporation
CPU	"Mikey" (WDC 65SC02 8-bit CPU)
Display	3.5-inch, 160 × 102
Price	US \$179.99



Whenever portable gaming is discussed, chances are Nintendo is the brand that immediately jumps to people’s minds. Sure, it may not have invented the market — Milton Bradley’s Microvision, for instance, was already doing the whole ‘tiny video game system with replaceable cartridges’ thing a full decade before the Game Boy. But Nintendo has had such a stronghold in that corner of gaming, with such an unbeatable succession of blockbuster consoles over the decades, one couldn’t be blamed for assuming they straight up created portable gaming.

The Japanese giant has effectively become synonymous with pocket gaming, and most (if not all?) portable lovers can likely trace their adoration for on-the-go play to one of Nintendo’s handhelds. Because of that fact, most nostalgic memories of video game-assisted road trips will inevitably feature Nintendo’s ubiquitous pocket-sized gaming machines.

Their undisputed portable supremacy left all newcomers fighting for scraps of market share, almost inevitably doomed to obscurity. Even the PSP, which performed remarkably well, appeared to be a failure because its sales charts were frequently compared to its only direct opponent — the money-printing behemoth that was the Nintendo DS. Despite selling more units than the SNES and the Sega Genesis combined, Sony’s valiant portable effort is widely (and wrongly) regarded as a failure just because it didn’t get close to the sheer number of clamshell *Pokémon* machines Nintendo was selling at the same time.

Kind of unfair, if you ask me.

And that is probably why there’s a very good chance you’ve never even heard of the Atari Lynx, let alone actually played with one. Coming out only two months after the debut of the Game Boy, Atari’s offering never really had a chance.

Considering how forward-thinking the console was, the Lynx’s failure is somewhat surprising, though. It wasn’t only the first ever colour handheld, it was also the first 16-bit handheld, back in a time when having more bits basically meant being ‘better’ — even if we didn’t have a single clue what a ‘bit’ was. Marketers have always banked on people’s general lack of familiarity with computer lingo, after all. Remember ‘Blast Processing’? Hell, I’ve personally seen hundreds of gaming forum flame wars where terms like ‘teraflops’ were thrown around by people I’m positive didn’t actually know what they were, or how they were used in gaming.

The Lynx started its life as the ‘Handy Game’, the very unfortunately named project by game maker Epyx in the mid ‘80s. The company was already in financial dire straits during the development of the soon-to-be-renamed portable console, and partners were required to bring the vision to game shelves. Nintendo and Sega passed on it, no doubt due to the fact that they were far more invested in the portables they were already working on at the time.

Atari, on the other hand, saw this as an opportunity to jump into the handheld fray, and thus the Lynx found a way to come to market. Under the terms of their agreement, Epyx would be in charge of developing software for the Lynx, while Atari would handle manufacturing and marketing. This probably seemed like a great arrangement (Epyx developed the system after all; who could be better at designing its first-party games?) until a few months later when Epyx went under, forcing Atari to take on the project entirely.

Needless to say, the Lynx was not off to a good start.

The console was also notable for being able to be played both upright and upside down, effectively swapping the position of the D-pad and face buttons to accommodate left-handed players. The design decision stems from the relative novelty of video games at the time, when it was thought this would be a necessary solution for the sake of inclusivity. Time would show that left-handed players are more than capable of adapting, however, so this design decision didn’t become the standard Atari may have imagined it would. Regardless, it adds to the Lynx’s uniqueness. I don’t think you can play *Link’s Awakening* with the Game Boy upside down, after all.

The alternate position modes didn’t end there. A handful of games were designed in portrait orientation, which meant you had to hold the Lynx vertically, more like you would a Game Boy. Operating the D-pad and action buttons while holding the system this way would make you look like you have no idea what you’re doing — but it’s the thought that counts, and not many portable consoles can brag about having not one, but three different ways to be held.

On the subject of the unique control schemes, this also holds true for the Option 1 and Option 2 buttons. Although akin to something like the Start and Select toggles you’d find in its contemporaries, the Lynx integrated these buttons into gameplay in a manner rarely seen in other consoles, which effectively meant the Lynx had four face buttons. That, too, was an oddity not only for portables but for video games in general at the time, and allowed for more complex design choices.

You know how in most Game Boy games, your actions are typically limited to fire/punch with one button, and jump with the remaining one? The Lynx offered an interesting solution that allowed for more input variations — even if the placement of those two extra action buttons wasn’t the most ergonomic for frequent use. Go look at the Lynx and tell me I’m wrong.

The Lynx came packed with a pretty competent port of *California Games*, a sports minigame title which is sadly not as well remembered here in North America as it was in my native Brazil. The bundle was a nice inclusion (even if the gameplay itself was kind of bland), and it’s also a decent showing of what the system can do. It blows away anything the Game Boy is capable of rendering, and in colour no less.

As a side note: remember when every console came with a bundled game? Those were the days...

Like any video game system, the Lynx also received a few lazy, shameless movie tie-in games. *Batman Returns*, for instance, is exactly as awful as a licensed game is supposed to be, though it flaunted impressive portable graphics for the time. Overall, the Lynx’ small library was made of ports of all the familiar non-Nintendo fare you’d find on other contemporary systems — the usual suspects like *Ninja Gaiden*, *Double Dragon*, and *Desert Strike* are all accounted for. Of course, I’d be remiss if I didn’t point out that the Lynx even had a port of my all-time favourite puzzler, *Lemmings*, and it’s far more impressive than the version the Game Boy received. I can tell you right now: if back then I were shown both ports, and then told to decide between the two systems, I’d snatch up a Lynx without a second’s hesitation. Forget back then, I’d still do that now! I have a ton of Game Boys, but a Lynx with a copy of *Lemmings* would be such a special addition to my portable collection.

In the end, the Atari Lynx was a technically impressive, quirky little handheld (ok, ‘little’ may be a tad generous. It was barely portable!) that bit off a little more than it could chew, what with the financial demise of its lead game developing company right out of the gate, and the stiff competition from Nintendo’s unsurpassable mainstays like *Mario*, *Zelda*, and *Pokémon*.

Still, it is a far better system than it’s remembered as, especially considering it came out in the same year as the Game Boy. Its library couldn’t hold a candle to Nintendo’s system, but it was no slouch, either. Any portable fanatic owes it to themselves to check it out.



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348
RoadBlasters
1990

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Atari Lynx
1989

349
S.T.U.N. Runner
1991

351
Block Out
1991

352
Robo-Squash
1990

Evercade		
Manufacturer	Blaze Entertainment	
CPU	1.2GHz Cortex-A7	
Display	4.3-inch LCD screen (480x272)	
Price	US	\$79.99
	UK	£59.99



Retro games have been at the forefront of duplication, emulation, and transformation for many years now. A lot of us feel frustrated with how hard it is to buy our favourite retro games the ‘right way’, and I can imagine a lot of us miss that feeling of breaking the seal, cracking open the box, and reading a manual before having to slot the cartridge into a system that we absolutely love.

Nothing has come close to filling this void, and handheld emulation doesn't recapture that childhood feeling either. Many players would love to experience the joy of the cartridge era again, and luckily that's exactly what Evercade seeks to achieve.

The Evercade is a handheld games console developed by Blaze Entertainment which launched in 2020 with the sole aim of bringing back that nostalgic sensation of collecting, trading, and playing with cartridges.

The handheld is designed to look like it’s straight out of the ‘80s, featuring strong lines, vibrant colours, and small aesthetic nods to the age of the arcades. The 4.3” screen sits centred on the device with an incredibly large D-pad that makes playing fighting games feel like the good ol’ days.

The high-gloss buttons are rounded and sit far above the surface to make it feel like you’re playing on an actual arcade cabinet — but the magic really happens on the back. This is where the cartridge slot hides, and because the aim of this handheld is to resurrect the time when cartridges flourished, the Blaze Entertainment team have made it their goal to feature hundreds of games across various cartridges for their devices.

A lot of well-known developers have jumped on board to supply Evercade enthusiasts with their favourite games. For example, you can find games from Intellivision such as the popular cow-launching *Earthworm Jim*, arcade classics like *Centipede*, the well-known *Pac-Man*, and even a handful of the popular *Worms* games. Not content with a library solely comprised of retro games, there are also a number of modern indie titles on the system, including titles like *Flea!* and *Xeno Crisis*.

This is why I love the Evercade — I love the nostalgic feeling of buying a game in physical form. The excitement of the package arriving in the post, and then opening it up to read the very descriptive colour manuals before slotting the plastic cart into my handheld and having to wait for it to boot up. It makes me feel like a child all over again.

If I want to explore a new game, I can simply ask my friends who also have Evercades to see if I can borrow theirs, or even trade it for a cartridge in my personal Evercade collection. This alone gives me ‘90s flashbacks. Plus, the Evercade is one of the only modern consoles that I take pride in displaying – keeping my collection of boxes out for friends and family to see when they pop over for a cup of tea.

There are over 280 games for the handheld that you can choose from, and each cartridge comes with a display box that features a sequential number on the side,

incentivising you to try and complete the whole Evercade collection — should you want to be the ultimate collector. Because the Evercade has agreements and the full licences to use and sell the games, there are no worries about the emulation being low quality either, as these games have been configured to work perfectly on both the Evercade handheld and their home console variant called the Evercade VS.

This makes the handheld incredibly reliable and allows you to play for hours on end knowing that you’re going to get flawless gameplay, unlike some handheld emulators currently on the market for the same price.

It’s an impressive handheld that brings back that nostalgic feeling of collecting cartridges, which I know many of us really do miss. Blaze Entertainment is always working on extending the library and is constantly trying to bring bigger and better products to the retro gaming market.

For me, the Evercade is a device that shines brightly amongst the current handheld market, simply by being an authentic nostalgic experience that uses modern technology. The fact that I can buy modern-day cartridges featuring some of my favourite games from some of the most well-known retro games developers in the industry is just the cherry on top.



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Evercade #11 'Xeno Crisis & Tanglewood'
2020

Mega Duck

Manufacturer	Welback Holdings
CPU	Sharp LR35902
Display	2.7" [48 (h) x 51 (w) mm] STN dot matrix
Price	NL £129.00



We all know Nintendo’s seminal Game Boy, the widely-regarded king of the handhelds, but what about the Cougar Boy? The Welback Holdings WG-108, better known as the Mega Duck or the Cougar Boy, was a handheld console developed by Hong Kong-based company Welback Holdings in 1993. Hoping to succeed where other Game Boy competitors had failed, including the Gamate by Bit Corporation (1990), Hartung’s Game Master (1990), and the Watara Supervision (1992), Welback Holdings set out to create a budget alternative. Despite the unique aquatic bird-themed branding, it never quite caught on, making little splash in the handheld gaming space of the early '90s. Today it is an elusive and expensive relic of a bygone era, evading the grasp of avid handheld collectors.

While production would be fulfilled by Welback Holdings directly, they reached out to international partners to distribute the system; Creatronic in the Netherlands, Hartung in Germany, Videojet in France, and Cougar USA in Brazil where it was marketed as the Cougar Boy. The most overt difference is the black shell of the Hartung Mega Duck version, as opposed to the standard white plastic shell of other models, making it the most sought-after device for Mega Duck collectors. Other than that, the Cougar Boy variant sold in South America had an altered title boot screen and logo, came bundled with a 4-in-1 game cartridge containing *Virus Attack*, *Electron World*, *Trouble Zone*, and *Dice Block*, along with stereo earphones.

The similarities in design between the Mega Duck and the Game Boy become strikingly apparent upon just one glance. While the Mega Duck had rounded edges over the straight-cut, slab-like shape of the Game Boy, the form-factor certainly echoes that of its competitor. In fact, much of the button positioning was nearly identical, such as the contrast control-wheel found in the middle of the left side on both devices. Moreover, the Mega Duck featured A, B, Start, and Select buttons, akin to the original Game Boy, only here they were a cool mint green. The Mega Duck, however, did not have a true directional-pad [D-pad] as the Game Boy had. Rather, there were four separate buttons, reminiscent of Tic-Tacs.

The Mega Duck was also slightly larger and heavier than its target competitor, and furthermore its 2.7 inch, 160x144 pixel, dot-matrix LCD display was just 0.1 inches larger than that of the Game Boy. It also maintained the nostalgia-infused green background panel common in handhelds of the era, equipping it with the technology to utilise four different levels of grey-scale on top of this green background to create depth and shadows.

Games can make or break a system, which is problematic considering roughly thirty game cartridges were ever released for this system, none of which were particularly innovative — although that doesn’t mean they weren’t entertaining. The first title released for the Mega Duck, *The Brick Wall*, was the only game developed in-house by Timlex International, a division of Welback Holdings. Here, players were tasked with defending the titular wall from an enemy tank hell-bent on demolishing the multi-layered construction until it had cleared a path. Fortunately, players had a tank of their own that would fire these same blocks to plug the gaps. If players successfully defended the wall

until a set period of time was over, they were victorious.

All other Mega Duck games from this point onwards were developed by Taiwanese developer Sachen (sometimes under the ‘Commin’ label), infamous for publishing unlicensed NES, Game Boy, and Mega Drive games. Many of these games would bear similarities to other popular titles available elsewhere. *Puppet Knight*, released in 1993 under the Commin label, had nothing to do with puppets. In fact, it was a *Bomberman* clone!

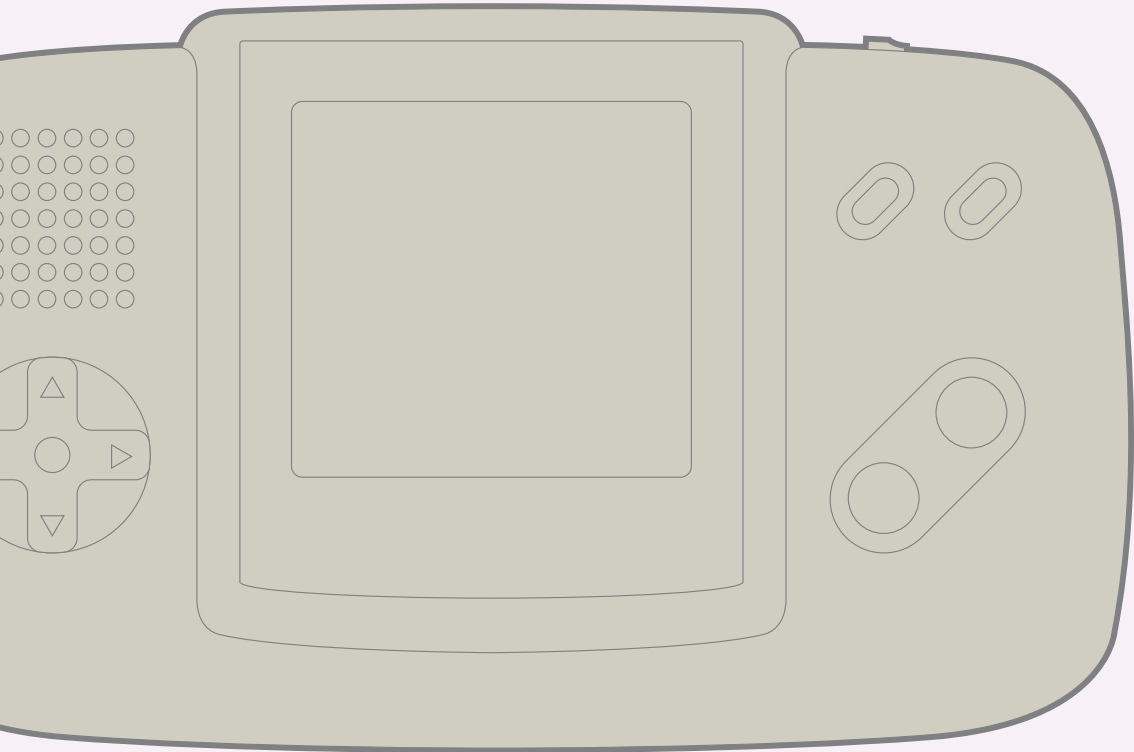
In a sense, the Mega Duck would live on through its target competitor (or perhaps be entirely subjugated and made irrelevant), since every game released for the system besides *The Brick Wall* would eventually be ported to the Game Boy by Sachen following the quick demise of the Mega Duck. More recently, 21 of the Mega Duck’s tiny library of games were bizarrely ported by fans to the Sega Dreamcast, giving them a further lease of life.

Evidently, Welback Holdings aspired for the Mega Duck to invoke the style and power of Nintendo’s exceedingly beloved Game Boy. Whereas the big competitors to the Game Boy, such as the Atari Lynx (1989) or the Sega Game Gear (1990), aimed to take a piece of Nintendo’s pie through offering more powerful, full-colour systems, the Mega Duck took the budget alternative approach. This undoubtedly failed. By the time the Mega Duck launched in 1993, the Game Boy was already entrenched in the market. The Mega Duck quickly faded into obscurity, only being kept alive in the minds of devout handheld collectors and compendiums like this in the years after.



354
Artic Zone
1993

Gamate	
Manufacturer	Bit Corporation
CPU	UMC UA6588F
Display	4 greyscale LCD
Price	US \$69.99
	UK £59.99



The Gamate is an enigmatic also-ran in the first proper wave of dedicated handheld consoles, which ostensibly competed with the Nintendo Game Boy and its peers, but ultimately failed to secure any notable slice of the market. In the years since its release, however, this portable curiosity has attained a kind of cult status amongst collectors, with hardware and games alike trading on the second-hand market for high prices. Its appeal is driven not only by its rarity, but also by the history behind it. Which is to say that it's all a bit muddled, frankly. But before we get to the ins and outs of the Gamate itself, some context is necessary.

It's easy in hindsight to view the handheld gaming scene of the early 1990s as a case of Nintendo's Game Boy dominating the market, with Sega's Game Gear and the Atari Lynx flailing around in so much dot-matrix dust, scrambling to pick up any pounds and pence (dollars and cents for our American readers) from players prioritising brightness and colours over affordability and durability, not to mention a decent battery life. And to an extent, that is correct.

The Game Boy was indeed the preeminent console of its era, launching in April 1989 and going on to sell almost 120 million units across its various models (Color evolution included). The Lynx, released in September the same year, was a battery-hungry beast that struggled to reach three million sales; while Sega's superior brand power of the time, riding high on the 16-bit success of the Mega Drive, pushed the late-1990-launched Game Gear to over 10 million. But these three were far from the only portables available during gaming's fourth generation.

In December 1990, NEC took its big-in-Japan PC Engine console into the handheld space with the PC Engine GT, marketed in North America as the TurboExpress. Like the Game Gear and Lynx, it offered full-colour gameplay and had the added benefit of using the same HuCard-format games as its home-based older sibling — but just like its contemporaries, it chewed through AAs like nobody's business. So too did the Nomad, a Sega handheld only released in North America in 1995 as a portable Genesis — it used the same cartridges as the regionally renamed Mega Drive and had a six-button layout to match the standard controllers of the time.

Over in Europe, 1990 saw the Hartung Game Master come out in Germany. It was subsequently sold in the UK as the Systema 2000 and was a far more basic affair than the TurboExpress, Game Gear, or Lynx, with a monochrome LCD screen of only 40x40 pixels. In 1992 came the Watara Supervision — the QuickShot Supervision in the UK — which followed the Game Boy's precedent of using a four-shades-of-grey display; and in 1993 the *excellently* named Mega Duck (aka the Cougar Boy) from Welback Holdings debuted, which also adhered to a grayscale screen approach.

The Gamate blinked into life in 1990, manufactured by the Taiwanese company Bit Corporation, based in Taipei, to offer an alternative to the Game Boy and the aforementioned competition. In the UK it was initially

marketed by Cardiff-based joystick maker Cheetah for a Game Boy-undercutting £59.99, with later packaging bearing details of an alternative distributor based in South Benfleet, Essex (these days, the building in question is a Malaysian restaurant). The console also received an official release outside of Taiwan and China via local partners in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Argentina, the United States, and Australia. The name Gamate — its pronunciation unclear, but 'Game Mate' is this author's go-to — was used internationally, but in Taiwan it was called the Super Boy, and in China it was the Super Child Prodigy. Catchy monikers indeed — but the Gamate never caught on as hoped, and production of the console ceased in 1993 or 1994, although games continued to release until 1995.

But was it only Bit Corp behind the Gamate? That's the name that greets players when they turn the system on, the Bit Corp logo rising from the bottom of the screen prior to the game starting, akin to how the Nintendo name scrolls down on a standard Game Boy (there's no satisfying 'ding' on the Gamate, though). But on at least some Gamate packaging, another name is present: Unisyn Electronics Corp of Taipei, Taiwan. Unisyn also appears on at least one Gamate game card, namely Tennis. What's more, several games bear the initials UMC on their box art or title screens. So, what's the story?

The best anyone can tell is that Bit Corporation — which developed games for the Atari 2600, ColecoVision, and Nintendo Entertainment System in the 1980s — was assisted in the design and production of this handheld by two further companies. The first is Gamtec, which was based in Taichung and developed games for the NES and Mega Drive, as well as the Gamate itself. The second, Dunhuang Technology, aka Funtech, was — and here's where we find some clarity — a subsidiary of UMC, or United Microelectronics Corporation, a semiconductor manufacturer based in Hsinchu. Funtech didn't stop at the Gamate either when it came to consoles — its Super A'can was a Taiwan-only home system launched in late 1995 but discontinued mere months later.

Bit Corp went bust in 1992, citing 'operational difficulties', and production and marketing of the Gamate switched to UMC — so that's the presence of those initials cleared up. But Unisyn Electronics Corp? That trademark, related to 'electronic games' and 'electronic game cartridges', was abandoned in 1993 — apparently because it gave way to, or was fully merged with, UMC. The specifics are not clear at all, but the best the internet can provide is that Unisyn is, basically, a previous name for UMC. That history lesson will have to suffice for now, because we need to get into what makes the Gamate tick.

On first impression, the Gamate is a fairly straightforward Game Boy clone. Powered by four AA batteries or 6-volt DC input, it uses a shades-of-green dot matrix LCD screen measuring 160x152 pixels, albeit of far inferior quality to that of Nintendo's all-conquering creation, as evidenced by many games suffering from horrific ghosting. Its A and B buttons are in the same formation as the Game Boy, with A on the outside, and there are Start and Select buttons above them. A single mono speaker

isn't low on noise but is incredibly shrill, but a stereo headphone lessens that pain somewhat, while dials are used to control both volume and contrast.

Where the Gamate differs distinctly from the Game Boy is how its interchangeable games are presented. They all come on cards that look very similar to the PC Engine's Hu-Cards, and those used by the Atari Lynx. They're made of thin but stiff plastic and are roughly credit card sized, with contacts on one end and artwork on the other. They can sometimes be tricky to slide out of the console, with little to grip onto, and some supported two players via a link cable. Brilliantly, a safety notice on each one tells users, "don't touch golden finger by hands." (We won't.) The games were sold in cardboard boxes with plastic inserts and manuals, with the cards themselves also sliding into a thin sheath for added protections against dust, spills and, obviously, "hands". The asking price: £14.99 RRP per game in the UK.

While externally the Gamate mirrors the Game Boy's functionality input for input, internally it's not quite a case of simply ripping off a better competitor with identical components. A *Retro Gamer* magazine feature republished on NintendoLife.com in 2014 notes that the Gamate uses a part-custom 8-bit CPU and isn't an exact clone, as had been previously assumed, although it's hard to ascertain specifics beyond that. The CPU changed during the Gamate's lifespan, with an updated model rolled out alongside a slightly improved LCD display. One easy way to tell which Gamate model you have in hand is to turn it on without a game card inserted — older releases will display vertical lines on screen, and the later version a glitchy chessboard pattern. Truthfully though, not even the updated display can do much to remedy the Gamate's greatest failing.

That ghosting, the flickering of moving objects on screen during play, is so fierce on the Gamate that any title where speed or accuracy are of the essence can be close to completely unplayable. *Tennis* — visually a clone of the Game Boy release of the same name, even featuring a suspiciously Mario-like umpire, but with simplified gameplay that maps both A and B to the same standard shot — is one such title, the ball's path tricky to follow as rallies unfold. Shooters like *Mars Voyage* and *Tornado* are made all the tougher to master when it's nigh impossible to see all the enemy projectiles coming your way, and the Formula 1-themed *GP Race* sees rival drivers flicker so badly it's incredibly hard to avoid smashing into them or being rammed from behind as they try to pass.

Slower-paced games fare better, but it's a push to call many of them enjoyable, at least without the caveat that there are superior versions of nearly all the Gamate's best titles on the Game Boy and other consoles. And that's because the software library for the Gamate — which extends to over 70 known releases, putting it ahead of the Supervision's 65 and Mega Duck's 24 original cartridges — while containing a few originals, is largely crammed full of frankly shameless clones. *Cube-Up* is *Tetris*, *Mighty Tank* (also released as *Vindicators*) is *Battle City*, *Monster Pitfall* is — you guessed it! — *Pitfall*, *Money Maze* is *Lock 'n'*

Chase, and *Bomb Blaster* is *Bomberman*. And it's not just the usual suspects getting ripped off either, as digging into the Gamate catalogue reveals some unexpected déjà vu.

Most Gamate titles were developed by Bit Corp itself, but 1993's *Metamorphoser* isn't one of them, produced instead by UMC (assuming there's a difference, beyond the name). Also known as *Tough Guy* — that's what the title screen says — this side-scrolling hack-and-slasher has a decent feel to it, with the player able to choose from three different weapons at the start of the game, and the graphics appearing more detailed than most on the platform. It's relatively responsive too, even with the Gamate's patchy D-pad factored in (it really doesn't handle diagonal inputs well), and enemy sprites are chunky and clear, victims of ghosting but not to a game-breaking level.

And then it strikes you: that guy I just killed looked almost exactly like one of the Foot Clan, and this robot thing sure resembles a Mouser. Actually, this level seems to be the same as stage one in Konami's Game Boy release, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Fall of the Foot Clan*. Hang on... *this is Fall of the Foot Clan*. That weapon select screen, it's just this clone's way of selecting the different Turtles — the sword is Leonardo's ninjatō, the 'spear' Donatello's bō staff, and the 'double club' is Michelangelo's nunchaku. Somebody get Konami's lawyers on the phone... or, rather, don't bother — it's been a few decades, after all.

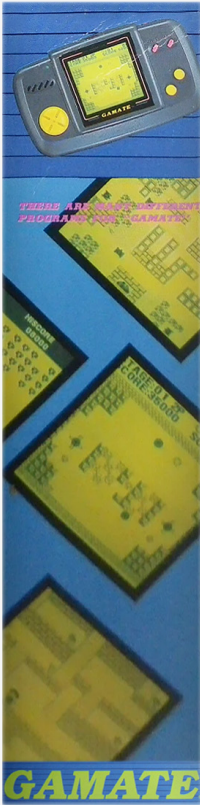
Elsewhere, *Kill Shot* is less the exciting shoot 'em up its box art makes it out to be and actually a clone of another Konami game, the block-filling puzzler *Quarth*. *Flying Goblin* is faintly comical for having the description to *Mars Voyage* printed on its box, albeit a slightly different version to the wording on the actual *Mars Voyage* packaging, and is a total rip-off of Capcom's *Gargoyle's Quest* but far fiddlier to make progress in due to that awful LCD display. And the UMC-made *Punk Boy*, while initially appearing original as its protagonist Charlie faces off against "the rotting Zombie, the Giant Vampire Bat, friggin' Frankenstein, and dirty old Dracula" (yes, the sleeve description uses friggin'), steals sprites and animations from Sega's pre-*Sonic* platform hit *Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse*. That sure is not swell.

We can't not shine a light on just how so-bad-it's-amazing some of the game packaging is for the Gamate. Artwork is a mix of the helplessly prosaic and the superbly surreal, but it's the wording that so often raises a smile. That's probably more a fault of poor translation than anything else, but it's beside the point when you get to see such gems as *Kung-Fu Fighter*'s array of opposition for the player to go one-on-one with: Corpse Face, Hot Leg, and Beard Guy are all, apparently, "the top players" you'll be battling. Beard Guy, what a champ. *Fantasy Travel*, a game starring a squirrel who's struck on the head by "a small wooden box" and transported to a land of "attacking things", bears the note that the unfortunate creature's experience should encourage the player to "get their USRDA (US Recommended Daily Allowance) of outdoor activities every day so they can be strong and healthy." That's right, kids: put your video games down and get the heck outside, already.

Which, to be fair, most kids would have done if presented with a Gamate instead of a Game Boy. While undeniably hardwearing with many consoles still playable today, the general build quality of this portable can't compare to Nintendo's machine, especially in regard to its screen. And its games are... well, at their best they're competent impressions of better titles. With no *Mario*, *Zelda*, or *Metroid* to light up imaginations, the Gamate lacked any kind of killer app, and while confirmed sales figures aren't known, that the system and its games quickly became available for bargain-basement prices (that £59.99 didn't last long) shows how desperate retailers were to clear their stocks. Of course, now the Gamate and its game cards are highly collectible, with ROMs playable on MAME for anyone interested but unwilling to spend big — but it's a fine example of how not everything desirable in the world of retro gaming is actually any good.

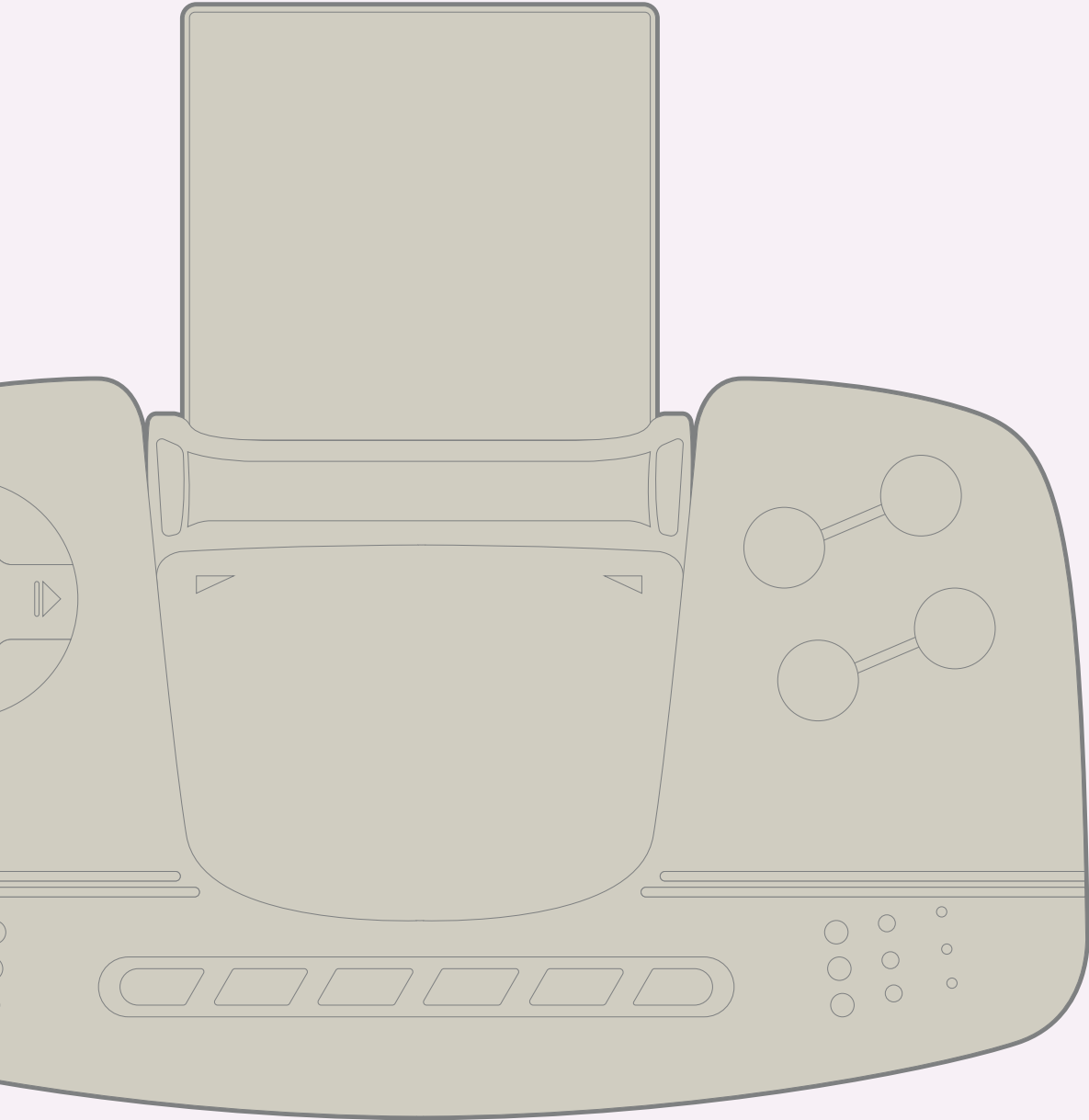
355
Volcano Panic
1991

356
Gamate Box [Side]
1990



R-Zone

Manufacturer	Tiger Electronics, Ltd.
Display	Polycarbonate Screen
Price	US \$29.99



Tiger Electronics ran wild throughout the ‘90s testing every product possible within the gaming and toy industry. Most children knew exactly who Tiger Electronics were, predominantly because they would release new toys and games consoles based on popular movie and TV characters, instantly garnering the attention of the younger audience who would coerce adults to splash out on constant upgrades and ‘better’ products more frequently than they might have liked.

Tiger’s first stab at the multi-game, cartridge-based handheld market came with the R-Zone, a device that was produced in 1995 after being revealed at the American International Toy Fair. Ultimately it was deemed unsuccessful, but this deserves inclusion here as it is unlike any other handheld in this book.

What’s unique about the R-Zone handheld is that it started off as a games console that you strapped to your head, a bit like a *Dragon Ball Z* Scouter. This ‘headheld’ (trademark pending) uses an elastic strap to put a viewfinder in the correct position, just in front of the right eye so that it reflects back into the console. It then connects to the controller via a 2.5m cable. This, along with other questionable design choices, would cause problems — Tiger Electronics would be inundated with emails and phone calls about broken products, lost cartridges, and beheaded children (I may have made one of these up).

The R-Zone uses specific cartridges that feature a transparent screen in the middle. This screen then has a red light directed at the cartridge in order to show the specific game. Every game has a unique window, allowing you to collect and trade them with friends. There was nothing cooler than slotting the cartridge into the headset while you were wearing it, as if you were about to jump into a whole new world through a virtual reality headset.

It is likely Tiger used a red light display, hoping to follow the ‘success’ of the Nintendo Virtual Boy. Just like Ninendo’s ill-fated attempt at VR, this too is an awkward games console, requiring you to aggressively squint in order to see the game properly, while the controller uses a very off-putting button layout that feels like you’re pressing Lego bricks. The ABCD action buttons still confuse me to this day!

It was Tiger’s first attempt at entering the portable multi-game market and it might not surprise you that sales were far less than anticipated.

The R-Zone soon evolved into a dedicated portable handheld with no headset, allowing you to use the same transparent cartridges and red light display in order to play these licensed games on the go. They called it the R-Zone X.P.G (Xtreme Pocket Game), and unfortunately it followed the same trajectory as its older brother, with very few units sold when it launched in 1997.

The R-Zone X.P.G had a much more organic button layout at least, with no Lego brick-like buttons. The cartridge was slotted directly into the face of the handheld, instead of the back or top of the device as you’d expect — this made it feel like you were slotting a key

into a nuclear submarine, ready to fire missiles (though that might just be me).

You would then need to manually flip up the red mirrored screen so that the reflection of the cartridge could be seen. It was far more fluid, and a lot easier to transport without things breaking compared to the original, but it felt rather cluttered. The face had over ten buttons on it, alongside large X.P.G branding which may have been off-putting for parents looking for something simple for their children.

Tiger was relying on their long list of licensing deals to attract new gamers too — they had games from well-known franchises like *Jurassic Park*, *Star Wars*, *Godzilla*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Panzer Dragoon*, *Batman*, and even *Men In Black*.

Unfortunately, those big names didn’t attract the attention Tiger was hoping for, and this machine has since been deemed as one of the worst handhelds of all time by some. Tiger Electronics wanted to compete with the Nintendo Virtual Boy, but they initially failed to create a high-quality gaming experience that projected visually pleasing gameplay — instead it gave gamers headaches, eye-strain, and false hope.



357
Panzer Dragoon
1996



Tiger Electronics established itself as a manufacturer of mainly LCD games in the late 1970s — 1978 to be exact. Most famous for its later development of Furby, which sold in huge numbers (literally millions), it developed a range of handheld games during its period of independence until it was consumed within the Hasbro Toy Group in 1998. Hasbro went on to grow the Furby brand from Tiger, which is still established to this day with the Furby Connect.

Before all this happened, Tiger was a family business through and through. Gerald Rissman formed the company and, along with sons Randy and Arnold, started making both handheld games for entertainment and as educational products. They produced games such as electronic bowling and the 2-XL Robot (one of its first products), as well as simple learning computers.

It was in the late '80s and '90s that Tiger Electronics became famous in gaming for their single-game handheld devices. The Tiger model had been established in 1988, with one of the first titles, *Back to the Future* (now rare and sought after), leading to more commonly known game titles such as *Gauntlet*, *Double Dragon*, *After Burner*, as well as *Sonic 1*, 2 and 3. Sega's arcade and console titles played a huge role in the range of games developed for the Tiger series. There are too many to mention here, but other famous names included *Altered Beast*, *Space Harrier*, *Thunder Blade*, *Golden Axe*, and *Hang-On*. Games of popular movies of the time, such as *Robocop*, *Batman*, *Space Jam*, *Judge Dredd*, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, also formed part of the suite available.

Tiger made some very obscure versions of its signature handheld too, including the much maligned *MC Hammer 'U Can't Touch This!'* It was so bad that I had to donate my copy to Ashens just to be rid of it!

Tiger handhelds had some success in the late '80s and '90s largely due to the aforementioned licences. These games were around during a very key moment in

gaming history when there was a shift from the arcade to the home as the place people wanted to play their games.

This development was mainly centred around enhanced speed and graphics, something that the Tiger games clearly lacked. You could argue these games were simplistic — I'd say they were very basic compared to other handhelds, even for the time. Later handheld games available from Tiger were far superior in terms of graphics, animation, and character design detail.

Unfortunately, there really weren't many reasons to pick up a Tiger Electronics handheld. Personally, at the time, I picked up Tiger handhelds for two reasons only. Firstly, on a trip to the seaside or on holiday in the UK, the weather was often bad, so if we were inside for extended periods or on a long car journey they would keep me occupied. Secondly, they were often presents from relatives or parents who recognised one of the multitude of licensed brands when it came to buying games for their kids. They were 'pocket money' games — you could find them for sale everywhere, not just the typical game stores. In newsagents they would sell them on a rack just by the comics. These were an inexpensive option, especially if they were given as gifts.

In recent years, these games, which often featured icons of the '80s and '90s, have become sought after and are more collectible. Hasbro have released versions of these retro Tiger devices as recently as 2020, with titles such as *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* allowing people (often older gamers reliving their youth) to get their hands on this part of gaming's handheld history.

I expect they will become more of a shelf display piece as time moves on, kept in their original packaging, perhaps graded to establish their supposed value. They're certainly more for looking at rather than for playing. Personally, I have a few. Mainly to display but, now and again, I put in some batteries, turn on the volume, and realise how lucky I am to have seen the progression of handheld gaming over the years.

What Am I Looking At?

An extremely simplified version of *Street Fighter II* allowed you to play as Ryu or Blanka, the packaging promised all the moves and excitement of the NES game, but if you ever see it being played you might question whether they've ever seen the original game at all.



Gizmondo

Manufacturer

CPU

Display

Price

Tiger Telematics

ARM9 S3C2440 processor at 400 MH

72 mm (2.8 inch) TFT screen

US\$229.99

UK£229.99

In the middle of his set, Jay Kay of Jamiroquai cheekily and knowingly asked the audience if they remembered why they were even there. He was playing a paid-for gig at the launch of the Gizmondo at London's Park Lane Hotel back in 2005, to a crowd full of minor celebrities; though familiar faces such as Pharrell Williams, Lennox Lewis and the late Verne Troyer managed to secure entry, quite a few of those in attendance have long since faded into obscurity — much like the console they were there to launch.

The Gizmondo was a handheld that was ahead of its time and even had decent financial backing, as well as some excellent software. It was, however, doomed to fail — and there were even rumours that it was some sort of money laundering scam for the Swedish Mafia. The story behind the Gizmondo is much more interesting than the device itself, which is so rarely remembered because so few people ever got to see it in the first place, with the console — despite millions spent on extravagant marketing stunts — selling less than 25,000 units worldwide.

I didn't even buy mine; the console I owned was a freebie, complete with the full range of games, due to the fact that I worked for the official UK distributor of the console at the time. We were a tiny indie wholesaler — the fact that we were able to secure the deal for exclusive distribution of an entire console platform and its software, despite a significant number of larger companies in the market (who frequently, and effortlessly, outbid us on single titles and entire ranges from even the smallest publishers) really should have been a sign that something was rotten in Denmark. Or rather, Sweden.

The handheld market in 2005 was vastly different to what we have today; it'd be a few years before Apple would launch the iPhone and completely alter the portable gaming market forever, for better or worse. The DS had launched and so had the PSP; Nokia had their N-Gage — which foresaw the merging of phones with gaming devices, albeit far less gracefully (and successfully) than Apple did — and there was even the GamePark GP2X, a fairly robust Linux-based handheld that was generally used to run emulators.

With so many handhelds on offer and such strong competition, it's no wonder that many of these devices fell by the wayside; Nintendo and Sony absolutely dominated the sector with the DS and PSP.

This didn't deter Swedish entrepreneur Carl Freer though, who led the development of the Gizmondo as Chairman of Tiger Telematics (unrelated to toy/LCD games company Tiger Electronics). He was pretty bullish and had a reputation for being short-tempered; their UK HQ had a decommissioned missile pointed skywards outside the building with PSP and DS logos on the nose, which perhaps perfectly illustrated Freer's mindset.

The Gizmondo's roots lay in the development of a device that used GPS to track the whereabouts of kids, aimed at worried parents — the idea to add games to make it a device that kids would actually want to carry around with them came later. The Gizmondo's GPS tech meant

that it could be used as a car-based sat nav device too, though I can tell you that, having used it for years personally, I didn't realise just how awkward and flawed it was until I got myself a proper, dedicated sat nav.

With SD cards as its software medium and a Windows CE-based operating system, along with support for MPEG-4, MP3, MIDI and WAV, the Gizmondo was a reasonably capable multimedia device too. I had mine with me when I attended E3 in 2005; photos of myself with Clive Barker and comic book writer Brian Michael Bendis were taken with the console's camera.

The GPS was its big selling point, however, and in the days before smartphones, it was an undeniably attractive USP. The feature was mooted for use in GTA-esque gang warfare game *Colors*, which would have seen players take control of actual slices of real-world territory, having their game take place in a mapping of their actual town or city. Billed as the world's first GPS game, it sadly didn't see the light of day thanks to the bankruptcy of Tiger Telematics.

Another innovation the console brought to the table was Smart Adds (that second 'd' in 'Adds' always bugged me). Smart Adds were a way of delivering advertisements to Gizmondo devices based on consumer location or interests, with the Gizmondo hardware itself being reduced in price if consumers opted for the Smart Adds-enabled version. The idea of having discount voucher style barcodes that could be scanned in local stores for product discounts — or just highly targeted ads — was an innovation way ahead of its time. It is worth noting, however, that this was a feature that was never actually enabled; so anyone who purchased a Smart Adds device actually just got themselves a discounted, regular Gizmondo.

So what caused the Gizmondo to crash and burn so spectacularly, despite how much money seemed to be pumping into the product? The announcement of a wide-screen Gizmondo just as the original device was launching really didn't help, giving even the curious early adopters — who'd normally check out every piece of new tech under the sun — a reason to hold onto their hard-earned cash and simply wait for the upgraded, improved device.

The somewhat thin software library, which actually wasn't anywhere near as bad as the console's reputation may suggest, also didn't help, especially when placed alongside the growing selections on both Nintendo's DS and Sony's PSP. Of course, those consoles also had the advantage of name recognition for many of their games, not to mention the brand awareness of the consoles themselves.

There was also the matter of where exactly all of the money to pay for extravagant, celebrity-filled launch parties and flagship stores on Regent Street was actually coming from. There were some spectacularly shady people behind the scenes of the console, not least Stefan Eriksson, who was known in the press in his native Sweden as 'Fat Stefan'. Eriksson had strong ties to organised crime back home — so much so that he was sent to prison numerous times in the '80s and '90s for multi-million dollar financial fraud and other crimes. He resigned from Gizmondo the

night before its US launch, after the press discovered his past as a convicted counterfeiter.

Eriksson was doing pretty well out of Gizmondo, with a seven-figure salary and even a company car worth a six-figure sum; all despite the fact that the company never reported a profit. He was also the driver of a Gizmondo-sponsored Ferrari which entered the Le Mans 24 Hour race in 2005 (he retired during the morning of the race with mechanical troubles).

Yet it was another Ferrari that would bring Eriksson true international notoriety and shine a huge spotlight on the strange situation behind the Gizmondo. Eriksson became infamous after crashing a rare, \$2 million dollar Ferrari — one of just 400 in the world. Reportedly driving at speeds most of us law-abiding citizens would class as 'insane', Eriksson wasn't sober either — so when he came off an embankment and hit a pole at 162mph, the fact that he survived, despite the car being split in half by the force of the collision, is a minor miracle.

There's much more to this story (it's well worth checking out further details), but this crash and the subsequent media attention suddenly brought the whole Gizmondo situation to an end.

Though Carl Freer's Tiger Telematics had raised £160 million and reached a market cap of \$1 billion before it dissolved in 2006, the Stefan Eriksson situation alone — without even considering the star-studded launch parties, Regent Street retail premises and financial incentives for those at the top — was an indicator of just how badly things were being run behind the scenes of the plucky little competitor to Nintendo and Sony's handheld dominance. Freer himself resigned just prior to the publication of a 2005 article on the Gizmondo company's financial situation in the Swedish press.

Though the financial situation was lucrative for many of those at the top, lower down the food chain people were rewarded with shares to supplement their lower salaries; though this may well have seemed like a good deal at the time, it wasn't to last for long. Despite all of this mismanagement and potential money laundering behind the scenes of the console, there was actually a finished product that did make its way into the hands of consumers.

Dispite what many like to believe, games don't just conjure themselves out of thin air. There were genuine people behind the hardware and software, who did the best they could despite the Gizmondo company's numerous issues away from the public face of the organisation.

One of the most prolific development studios working on titles for the device was Warthog Games, originally founded by ex-EA staff in 1997. Warthog was a well-respected studio that made a name for itself initially with its first game, *Starlancer*, a *Wing Commander*-esque space combat sim published on PC by Microsoft, before moving into the realms of licensed titles for the likes of Activision, Infogrames and EA themselves. Warthog developed games based on licences as diverse as *Tiny Toons*, *X-Men* and *Harry Potter*, before being acquired by Tiger Telematics in

2004 and becoming part of Gizmondo Studios.

Of the 14 titles that made it to release for the Gizmondo (in Europe at least; the US only got eight titles for the system) four were from the former Warthog Games; these were arguably the best games for the console too.

The Gizmondo console launched with just one game ready, which happened to be a Gizmondo Studios title, *Trailblazer*. Despite the negative image you may have of the Gizmondo in general, *Trailblazer* was a genuinely impressive, fast and smooth racing title — almost certainly the perfect game to launch the console with and show off exactly what the hardware could do. Wrapped in a Designers Republic-esque, *Wipeout*-style sheen of futuristic logos, fonts and neon design work, *Trailblazer* also had a superb, pulse-pounding electronic soundtrack that really added to the experience.

Unquestionably the Gizmondo's killer app, the unfortunately named *Sticky Balls* was the creation of industry legends John and Ste Pickford, whose Zed Two studio was bought by Warthog prior to their own acquisition by Tiger Telematics. *Sticky Balls* is a physics-based puzzle game that takes some inspiration from the real-life game of Pool, in that players use a springy cue to propel coloured balls at balls of (hopefully!) the same colour. The aim is to hit (and stick to) balls of the same colour until they form groups of seven and disappear. *Sticky Balls* was colourful, simple to pick up and incredibly addictive.

Richard Burns Rally was the third Gizmondo Studios-developed game to be released and took a more realistic approach to rally racing than may have been expected. It was a pretty tough game and may well have held some appeal for car or rally enthusiasts, but it just felt a little bland and lacking in fun for me, despite some pretty impressive visuals.

The final Gizmondo Studios title to see the light of day was *POD: Point of Destruction*. *POD* was, at first glance, a game that appeared to ape top-down shooter *Geometry Wars* — though it was, in fact, a reboot of Commodore 64 title *Proof of Destruction*. Imagine the frantic twin-stick action of *Geometry Wars* taking place on a fixed grid, which is damaged and made more restrictive to navigate as enemies explode on it, and you're pretty much there with *POD*. This was another title that had a great soundtrack, which really showed off what the Gizmondo was capable of from an audio perspective.

Though October 14th, 2005 marked the last of the Gizmondo's software library to be released in the EU, the following week saw the device and eight titles launch in the US. Sadly, that was the first and only wave of games that the US received — the writing was pretty much on the wall for the console by then, with the Swedish press investigation and Carl Freer's departure being timed just as the console was arriving in America.

Though the few years leading up to the Gizmondo's staggered 2005 launch saw Freer along with other members of Tiger Telematics and Gizmondo Studios bullishly gunning for the big guys in the handheld sector, the

shaky, illicit foundations that just about held together for launch weren't to last. Those at the top of the food chain seem to have escaped from the situation relatively intact, whereas those at the bottom — in sales, distribution and development — were left somewhat high and dry. It's not every day that you're a part of a handheld's history who's noble aims almost literally crushed and burned at speeds tearing a rare Ferrari in half. But then again, not every console is the Gizmondo.

And we're never likely to see anything like it again. Despite the ill-gotten, misused gains at the top of the ladder, there were hundreds of people just like myself (in my lowly position in wholesale, picking and packing very few of these devices and games once they became available) who were determined to get the Gizmondo to market and perhaps help an underdog have its day. Here's to you Gizmondo; if nothing else, you were quite the fascinating cautionary tale — one which Jay Kay of Jamiroquai probably has no memory of these days.

358
Smart Adds Edition
2005

359
Trailblazer
2005



358



359

Auto Race

Manufacturer	Mattel Electronics
CPU	Rockwell B6100-15
Price	US \$24.99



Gaming on the go owes much to maths — specifically, the calculator.

Today, we live in an age of electronic opulence; full-blown computer games can be carted around on handheld systems purpose-built for gaming. Nintendo's Switch is arguably home to some of the generation's best games. The market for handheld electronic gaming has become so diverse that there's room for both the exceedingly conventional and downright bizarre, like the indie-crafted, crank-enabled Playdate system. But back in the early 1970s, gaming was mostly limited to arcades and amusement parlours packed with pinball machines, pachinko, shooting galleries, and — if you were lucky — the occasional Computer Space. *Pong* and the Magnavox Odyssey had just introduced the idea of home gaming to the masses with their explosive launches in 1972.

But the idea of miniaturising that experience, creating an electronic game that could slip into your pocket, didn't start to bubble up until the mid-1970s. And it was born not from the world of entertainment but the calculator.

George J. Klose, a product development engineer at Mattel, and Richard Cheng, his boss at the company, came up with an idea to repurpose the seemingly ubiquitous LED-screened handheld calculators of the day and turn them into an electronic game. In the patent filed by the two in January 1977, they noted that, while there were one or two handheld electronic games on the market, they didn't require skill. Instead, those proto-handhelds were all games of chance, like the 1975 electronic roulette wheel, and the electronic fruit machine from the same year.

The two proposed something entirely different: "a new class of games which may be manufactured at relatively low cost utilising present-day electronic techniques and which nevertheless provide a high degree of play value."

The idea was to create a small machine that would run on the guts and display of a calculator, but instead of showing numbers, it would show little red blips arrayed on a three-lane racetrack depicted by white lines painted on the screen. The sound came from a single speaker, which delivered beeps for crashes and a steady tone that increased in pitch for the car's engine.

Players shift a plastic rectangle adorned with the picture of a race car left and right to weave the blip representing the player's car between other blips representing the other vehicles. A switch to the left of the small horizontal screen allowed players to shift from first to fourth gears during the race. The game's objective is to manoeuvre to the top of the screen without hitting any of the cars scrolling down the lanes and then stay there for a second before being returned to the bottom of the screen, thus completing a lap. The game ends when you complete four. A small display above the track shows your time in seconds. The faster you complete the four laps, the better.

Klose typed out the concept on a few pages of paper, and Mattel shipped it off to Rockwell International, which specialised in calculator chip designs. The project fell into the hands of Mark Lesser, a circuit design engineer who

loved the idea of shifting gears from calculator design to making video games. He was tasked with redesigning the in-house chips and writing the program from scratch, transforming a calculator into a racing game Mattel could ship to stores. The assembly language program fit into the chip's 511 bytes of ROM and took about 18 months for Lesser to stuff into the allotted space.

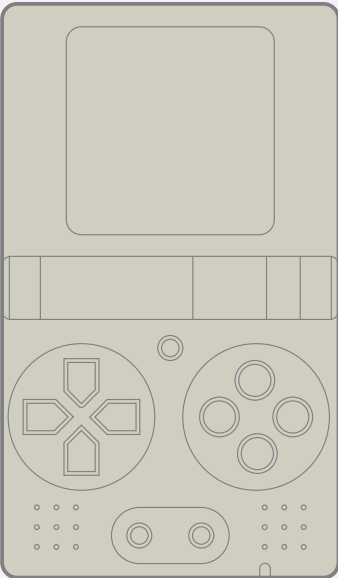
The trim system was packed into a taupe-colored plastic rectangle adorned with stickers proclaiming it the Mattel Electronics Auto Race and adding a bit of subdued flare to the gear shifter and race track. Auto Race launched for a penny shy of \$25 and was soon dropped to less than \$19 as the toy company, best known for Barbie dolls and Hot Wheels, seemed to quickly lose faith in this new approach to play.

Fortunately, Auto Race managed to squeak out enough sales to convince Mattel to have Lesser design a successor: Football. Early expectations were low for that game as well when it hit in 1977. Initially, Football was distributed exclusively through Sears, and the company cut its original order of 500,000 units to 100,000 because the retailer projected the system wouldn't sell. But within a few months, Sears was requesting half a million of the handhelds a week.

The success of Mattel Electronics Football led to the company's big push into video games and, arguably, gave birth to handheld gaming.



360
Mattel Auto Race
1976



FunKey S

Manufacturer	FunKey Project
CPU	ARM Cortex-A7 @ 1.2 GHz
Display	1.54 inch, 240x240
Price	EU €65,00

Who knew mini handhelds would become such a popular purchase for gamers throughout 2020 and beyond? Let’s be honest, playing games on a box the size of a Tic Tac container isn’t the most comfortable way to consume your favourite video games — nor is it really practical — but that doesn’t take away from the fact that these devices are continually growing in popularity.

One of the most popular of these mini handhelds is known as the FunKey S. It was launched on Kickstarter in 2020, and over 2,000 backers pledged a total of \$180,000 to get this thing off the ground. Now, it’s the world’s smallest foldable handheld that can play a wide variety of retro games through emulation.

But just how tiny is it? Well, it has a 1.54” IPS display with a resolution of 240 x 240 and a refresh rate of 50hz. To give you some comparison, the screen is only slightly larger than a bottlecap!

It comes with itty-bitty L1 and R1 shoulder buttons, action buttons the same size as a 3.5mm headphone port, and a lanyard so that you can attach it to your keys! That’s right, it’s designed to be attached to your keys so that it comes everywhere with you, without you having to put it in your bag or a carrying case. When open, this handheld is the same size as a Hot Wheels car.

This dinky dynamo took design inspiration from the ever-so-popular Game Boy Advance SP. The clamshell design was a huge success between 2003 and 2015, thanks to the Nintendo DS line which also took some inspiration from the aforementioned SP (and other Nintendo handhelds that came before it). The FunKey S even keeps the foldable ‘snap’ noise that is forever ingrained in my memory from childhood — this small feature adds an addictive nostalgic touch that really made me fall in love with this tiny handheld.

The passionate team of four behind the FunKey S have somehow managed to create a handheld that looks adorable and feels seamless to play, all while powerful enough to emulate PlayStation 1 games. Yes, really. We had the chance to ask them what inspired them to create such a device.

“The inspiration came after a famous electrical genius under the pseudonym of ‘Sprite_TM’ presented in 2016 the world’s smallest workable Game Boy ever made — so small it could be carried on a keychain. The level of electrical and software engineering was pretty impressive but it was also damn cute. This later came to be the ‘Pocket Sprite’, the first commercial console that initiated the ‘tiny consoles’ trend, but at the time it was just a crazy project and we were inspired to do the same — just for fun.”

They continued, “Sprite_TM had not yet shared the designs/software files at the time so we decided to build our own console from scratch, but with a few more tricks up its sleeve: larger screen and buttons thanks to a foldable design, more powerful, open source... This became our first functioning prototype called the Keymu for ‘Keychain-emulator’. It became viral and this gave us the incentive to build more than a prototype: a real commercial product. The

Keymu became the FunKey Zero (a non-foldable proof of concept of the FunKey S), which then became the FunKey S as we know it.”

Inside there is a 1.2Ghz processor, 64MB of RAM, a 10mm speaker and a whopping 410mah battery, all trimmed down and assembled to fit inside the small shell. That in itself is an impressive feat!

The team also hand-built an operating system in order for it to operate well with the miniscule buttons. The emulators are simple to understand and, when selected, open up your ROM library and pull in the artwork files, allowing you to sort through your collection using the artwork alone. This can be easily organised by simply plugging the FunKey S into your computer and using drag and drop functionality, something many handheld emulators do not do. Once you have the basics under your belt, the FunKey S is a simple and adorable handheld, with an enthusiastic fanbase in the thousands.

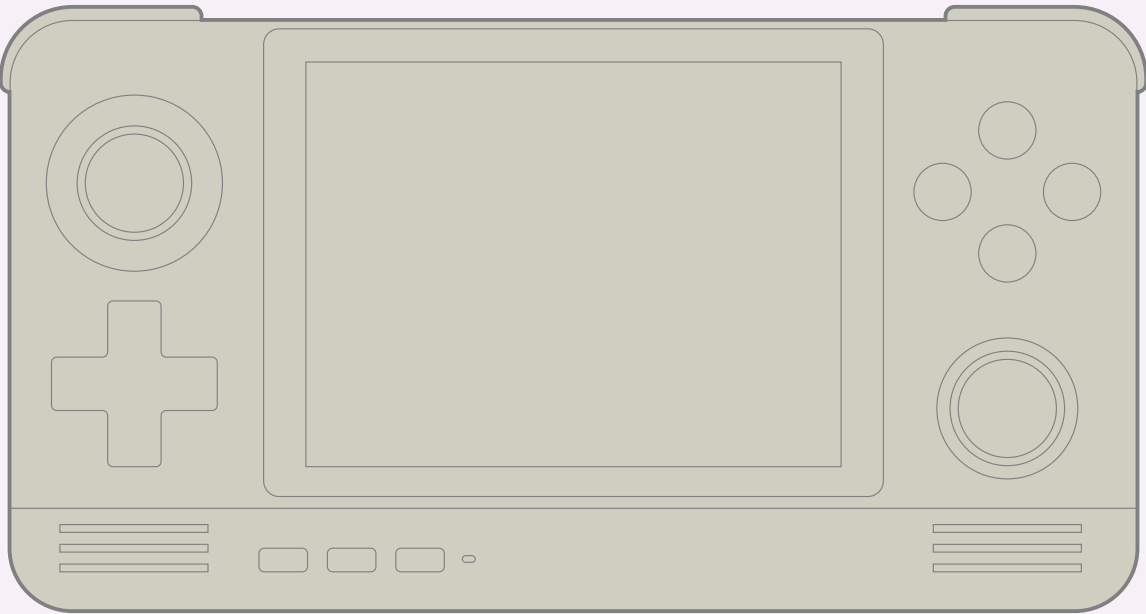
While a lot of handheld manufacturers are creating high-end devices with large touchscreens and powerful processors, the FunKey S takes a less serious approach. This alone is why many have fallen in love with this miniature device — it lets you sit back and play your games in a way that many gamers never thought possible. PlayStation 1 games on a keyring? That’s magical, and a respectable masterpiece in a time when there are so many handhelds to choose from.

Size doesn’t always matter, and the FunKey S team have absolutely proven that.



361
FunKey S Box [Front]
2021

Retroid Pocket 2+		
Manufacturer	Retroid	
CPU	Unisoc Quad-core Tiger T310	
Display	3.5 inch 480p touch screen	
Price	US	\$99.00



The original Retroid Pocket 2 (RP2) was perfectly poised to sweep the handheld market when it debuted midway through 2020; with the majority of humankind restless at home due to an enduring pandemic, the idea of a pocketable gaming console that could evoke warm and fuzzy childhood memories sounded heavenly. The buzz surrounding the RP2 was so compelling that many people, myself included, were inspired to create retro-gaming YouTube channels as an outlet for our excitement. After several shipping delays, the RP2 finally descended upon our homes, and was a decent device for its price; many could overlook its cheap build quality, painfully-stiff buttons, and clunky interface in exchange for the sheer joy of playing old-school favourites on the go.

Another factor that contributed to the RP2’s runaway success was that it offered nearly a dozen different colour schemes, with everything from unique designs to pitch-perfect recreations of colour patterns found in classic systems like the Super Nintendo, Game Boy Advance, and Nintendo 64. But as surely as the world turns, gamers were soon left wanting more.

Thankfully, the Retroid Pocket 2+ (RP2+) launched in December 2021 with several important upgrades. Its predecessor’s moderately-powerful MediaTek MT6580 chipset saw a hefty performance upgrade to the Unisoc Tiger T310, sporting a 2.0GHz high-performance CPU clock speed that allowed the RP2+ to chew through previously-sluggish systems with ease. Both the D-pad and face buttons received a much-needed facelift, with conductive rubber connections that are more akin to classic gamepads than the clicky dome switches found on the original Retroid Pocket 2. And while the screen maintains the 3.5” size and 640x480 resolution of the original device, the RP2+ thankfully shipped with touchscreen capability, enhancing the navigation experience greatly over previous Retroid products.

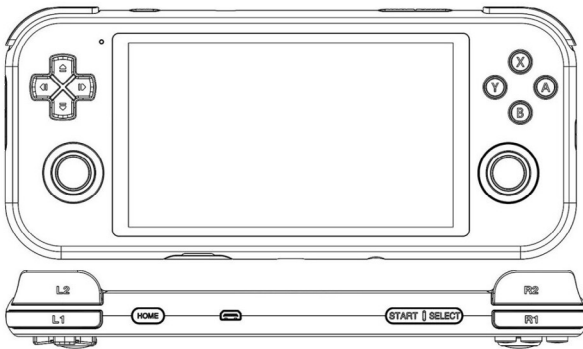
This device’s striking design similarity to the original RP2 was also a deliberate decision: the company literally used leftover RP2 shells when assembling the Retroid Pocket 2+. In a community rife with e-waste, it’s refreshing to see a company reuse old parts. In fact, Retroid also sold an upgrade kit for \$65 that included a new computer board and buttons, so you could drop the new parts right into your old RP2 shell — add another \$20 and you’d get the touchscreen too. So, if you were lucky enough to snag a rare colour scheme for the RP2 (like the coveted ‘watermelon’ unit), you could upgrade it to the RP2+ internals and have a device that’s even more unique. This clever and frugal approach comes at a cost though, in that we’re still stuck with a slider contraption for the right-side analogue ‘stick’, but it’s a worthy sacrifice on a device that excels in systems which rarely used that right analogue stick input anyway.

In terms of performance, the RP2+ can thankfully emulate most of the game consoles that take advantage of its 4:3 aspect ratio screen. Handheld systems from Game Boy to Nintendo DS look wonderful on the display, and the extra bit of processing power means you can apply custom shaders and filters to more readily mimic the original LCD displays of those old devices. 8-bit and 16-bit

home consoles systems are all excellent too, but where it really shines are on the platforms that were challenging to the previous generation of handhelds; this little \$99 device is a great way to play PlayStation, Nintendo 64, and Dreamcast in particular, upscaled perfectly to take advantage of the RP2+’s 640x480 resolution. And with enough tinkering, you could even run a small sampling of GameCube and PlayStation 2 games at playable speeds, although you will mostly be limited to 2D and lightweight games from those consoles.

But the Retroid Pocket 2+ isn’t without fault. In the hands, it’s apparent that the RP2+ pays homage to more recent Nintendo outputs, like the 3DS and the Switch; the offset analogue stick on the left (and that abysmal slider on the right) are reminiscent of the former, while the stacked and clicky trigger buttons are nearly dead-ringers for the latter. And while its boxy, squarish design turns heads on Retroid’s website, in practice the experience can feel a bit cramped, with sharp edges that can dig into your palms during a long play session. The device also lacks some important inputs, like clickable L3 and R3 buttons, which will limit your ability to set custom hotkeys and shortcuts. And while the 3.5” screen’s 4:3 aspect ratio makes it ideally suited for emulating systems that originally ran on old NTSC or PAL televisions, those same screen dimensions mean that modern content — like PlayStation Portable, Android games, or even game streaming — can feel squished and squinty for all but the eagle-eyed.

All things considered though, the sheer amount of value that the Retroid Pocket 2+ brought to the table was an unprecedented triumph, with a bold price point that made its competitors think twice. For \$99 and change, handheld enthusiasts were easily able to pocket six generations of video game consoles, with the power to emulate tens of thousands of games at their fingertips.



1+2=?

While this book was being written, a promo video for the Retroid Pocket 3 was leaked. Featuring a Switch Lite-like design, various colour combinations, and bigger screen, one can only assume that the internals will see an improvement too. Emulation gaming on the go continues its ascendancy!

OUR BACKERS.

@slashiel01
A.G. Aragon
A.M. Tulloch
Aaron Bennett
Aaron C-T
Aaron Chast
Aaron Copeland
Aaron Gaglia
Aaron George
Aaron Johnston
Aaron Kemnitzer
Aaron Santellanes
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Adam David Gibson
Adam Humphreys
Adam Mitchell
Adam Rebottaro
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Adrian Nuyda
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Alexandra Aspinall
All Things Wrestling
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Ana Santillan

Anas D. Al-Eisawi
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André "AFCC" Cardoso
Andre "Andy Tango"
Teh
Andre Farsalas
Andre Jacobs
Andreas Bendix
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(merman1974)
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(Retro Gear Customs)
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Andy Barton
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Andy Mackie
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Chanza
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Athziri & Derek
Gerhard

Atiq Bhagwan
August & Athena
Austin Lee Voigt
Auntie May
Austin Wood
Avinash Makan
Avram Vreman
Ayed Brais
Ayla Joan Sutherland
Babak Abrishamchian
Bailey Caine
Batman
Baz Chan Anonym
Collective
Ben "PSP Was Good"
Rothenberg
Ben & Brian Pugh
Ben Bulbeck
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Ben Johnston
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Ben Rhymely
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Ben Wheare
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BigBadEarl
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Bobo Deng
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Brett Vezzani
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LAV

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Brittany Sullivan
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Brucolaq
Brucolaque
Bruno Mendonça
Bryan "no thumbs"
Hernandez
C A BARDSLEY
Cabel Sasser
Caleb Blankenbaker
Caleb Metheny
Callum George
CALM93
Cameron Hawkins
Cara Embry
Cara Lin
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Carl Ferro-Fields
Carl Stratford
Carlo Saltalamacchia
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Zhu
Carlton Zhu
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Christopher Miller
Christopher Rivera
Christopher Sarazin
Christopher Savčak
Christopher
Southworth
Christopher Stanford
Daly
chun kim
Chun Man Chan
Claire Price
Clarence Newell
Claudia
Cody Drury
Colectionarul
Colin Corliss
Colin Grist
Collin Brown
(RewindingTime)
Connor Koster
Connor Milem
Conor O'Donovan
consollection.de
Conte Damacy
Corey Keith
Cory Bevilacqua
Cory Boulanger
Cosmografik
Costea Mihai
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CougarTech67 -
Torrance, California.
USA
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(blacmauds)
Craig Aspinall
Creighton Shaffer
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Cristian Viver
CrunchyFox
Dad loves Len always x
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Dallin Schmidt
Damien Dornford
Damien Innes
Damien Wilde
DaMikki
Damo McLaughlin
Dan 'TurboDan'
Bennett
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Dylan Hickman
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Édouard Marquez
Eduardo
Eduardo Wosgrau
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Edward Little
Edward regan
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edwin gamino
El Pescado
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Gerald22
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Taylor
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Gregory Miller
Gregory Spenser
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Habib
Habib Maghrabi
Hai Nguyen in the Two
Seas
Halit Bal - HtheB
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Hannah Lucy Farren
Hannah Readnour
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Harry Herd
Hector Perez
Henrik Bertram
Hermes Rosario

Honest Abe
Hudson 'Aitch' Anstee
HylianPrime94
Ian Burton
Ian Christopher
Donnelly
IG: @OutdoorGamer
Imran Yalcin
InsaneArcane5997
Ion Virgil Nadasan
Ittiphan Jearkjirm
J. L. McClatchy
j0hnnkicks
Jack 'TooManyLegbones'
Miller
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Jacob Bustamante
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Jan „endlife“ Martinek
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JEKKI
Jennie Falconer
Jennifer Johnson
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Jeremie Barnes
Jeremy Gough
Jeremy Lakers
Jeremy Spillmann
Jeremy Worley
Jesper Johansson
Jesse Mann
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Jilles Swain
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Jimmy Norville
Joanne Smillie
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Joe Amato
Joe Avery

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Joel Reid
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John Cummins
John Flickinger
John Leach
John Matson Jr
John Paul Acreman
John Piper [Pipes]
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john swartz
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John Voorhees
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Johnny Amizich
JokerMT
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Jony Sun
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Josiah Khani
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Fernandez
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Diaz
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Juanca Cardell Gaya
Julien Bouchard
Justin "Cneasai"
Bullard
Justin "Danger" Uy

Justin Calvert
Justin J. Olmedo
Justin Khan
Justin Lemminger
Justin Olivas [S7ICKYRIC3]
Justin Owlett
Justin Parmer
K-Tuck
Kaipo Kiaha
Karl C Huber
Kasey McMichael
Katarzyna Cardenas
Kate Griffiths
Kayaba
KCShadow
Keegan Chua
Keith "Keef" Day
Keith Baker
Kelly Russell
Ken 'McSwervy'
Meservy
Kenneth Chik
Kenneth Kwok
Kerapon
Kev Anderson
Kevin Friel
Kevin Gonzalez Velez
Kevin Khong
Kevin Koudijs
Kevin W Piedra Jr
KGE 82
Khairul Selamat
Khay Taing
Kiasha
Kieffer Olvera
Kielamel Sibal
Kieran Collings
kimberley hallam
Kirstie Shepherd
Klaas-Wim van
Diermen
Kris Gilmour-Jack
Krystal Bohannan
Kuan-Hsun Chien
Kunal Nadkarni
Kyle K Boyd
Kyle Molloy
Kyle Reich
Kylito Aaron
L Dunn
Larry Anderson
[RetroGmr]
Lars Schlicht
Laszlo Stadler
Leah Dougherty
Lee McCann
leftoverchops
Legend of Hayden
Lenny Rojas
Leo Waffenschmidt
Leonardo "LeolmChewingGum"
Anchundia
LEVST3R
Liam Harper
Liam Huckaby
Lim Junxiang Collin
Liran Nuna
Lisandro Suarez
Lister
Liz Birchfield
Logan Pladl
Loïc H.
Lonnie Artis
Lou Goodwin
Low Five Gaming

Lt. Data
lucia I barroso
Ludovic Landry
Lukas Hansen
Lukáš Kořán
Luke Allen
Luke Faith
Luke Jordan
Luke Palmer
Lukey P
Lutz Jakob
M Strange
Machlen Polfliet
Maciej Lisiecki
Macklin "Mack Daddy"
Janice
MagicDoritoBill
Maik Thomalla
Majestano
mangotronics
manyeyes
Marcos Sánchez Pérez
Marin Mestrovic
Marissa Miller
Mark Bartoszek
Mark Bennett
Mark Isalgue
Mark Robinson
Mark Staufenberg
Mark Sullivan
Mark Sztainbok
Mark van der Meer
Mark Watson Jr
Marke Hallowell
MartianBlobfish
Martin Delgado
Kielamel Sibal
Marvin Lindemann
Mary Ann Abacan
Mary K. Williams
Mary Stowe
MaskedSoldier
MassiveRican
Masterdeadlock
Mati-Cam
Matt Byerwalter
Matt Finelli
Matt Gillespie
Matt Parker
Matt Porter
Matt Simpson
Matt Tate
Matt, James & Andrew
Dale
Matteo Bongiorno
Matthew "Iek"
Stephenson
Matthew Hodgson
Matthew Janson
Matthew Martin
Matthew McGrory
Matty Mo
Max Jawad [MaxMan]
Max Paladino
Max Smith
Max Witter
Maxime Bourdarie
Maxime PANNETIER
Maximilian Rassu
Maxwell Neely-Cohen
Mehmet Can Yavuz
Mel Andrew Bato
meredith harris
Mg2+
Michael "Miggi" Seifert
Michael Bergeron

Michael Cyruk
Michael E Suszek
Michael Fabian
Ladurner
Michael Hadley
Michael Khatchikian
Michael Klucher
Michael Lukas
Michael McLaughlin
Michael Roberts Jr.
Michael Steenberg
Michal Wysokinski
Michel de Wit
Miguel Payan Jr.
Mihai Alexandru
Costea
Mike Apiz
Mike Burgess
Mike Marshall
Mike Martin
Mike Zinn
Miles Lambi
Milo Rodriguez
Miquel Cabot Mir
Mitzzy
Mohaimen Khan
Muhamed Ramic
Natasha E. Finney
Nathan Cook
Nathan Cruzado
Nathan Ellingsworth
Nathan James Todd
Nathan Orta
Echevarria
Nathan Phillips
Neal Kinder
Nelson Colón Rivera
Nelson Tiago Remoaldo
de Oliveira
Niall Gaffney
Nicholas Henderson
Nicholas Mantzoros
Nicholas Seron
Nick Leach
Nick Muy
Nick Piampiano
Nick R. Mendoza
Nickom Jaap
Nigel Wood
Nitin Dahyabbhai
No Average Joe
Noah Samuel Weitz
Nostalgia_Chaser
Obed Estrada
Obed Estrada
Olive Wagner
Olivia June
Olivier Lorenzo
Omar Espinosa
Omar Esquivel
Oscar De Frenza
Oscar Munoz
Villanueva
Oscar Robinson-Alam
Oskar Dickson
Oswaldo Olguín Bauzá [Mr. Chaco]
Owais Tauqir
Ozzy Lopez
PAMcHugh
PAN BANG HAO
Paolino Cioni
PatchworkGirl
Patrice Mallette
Patrick Boyle
Patrick Wilde

Patrizia Lekić
Paul Black
Paul Freiert
Paul Herz
Paul Hum
Paul Lee
Paul Nightingale
Paul Panteli
paul rigby
Paul Usowicz
Pavel Brodsky
PC-tan
Pedro Iglesias
Pete Reis-Campbell
Pete Shaw
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Peter Armstrong
Peter Belgrave
Peter Campbell
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Phillip Drier
Phillip McMahon
philtank
Pimy
Pit
Pit Art's
Pit de Cazernal
PJ Hunsicker
pokecommons
Preston Crawford
Prin
Priscilla Wells
Quillan & Clementine
Cole
RabidRabbit
Rais Malik
Rajen Savjani
Randall Stern
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Raphaella
Razole
Reece Donovan
Reilly
Ren Davis
Rene Muzik
Retro Rewired
Reuben Zaramian
RG Geek
Ricardo Bonilla
Richard Brant
Richard Emlyn Jones
Richard McMullan
Richard Munn
Richard Taing
Richard Varall
Rick Payne
Rico Milster
Ridge 'Deadite' Briel
Rik Wadsworth
Rilmen_825
Rob Clandfield
Rob van der Boon
Robert D Wooldridge
Robert Sokalski
Robert Stratman
Roberto Sanchez
Goldar
Robin Theunissen
Rocco Buffalino
roddy low
Rodney Larsen

Rodrigo Leles
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Roel Borkent
Ronald Clayton
Ronny „IronEagle“
Meier
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Ruben K.
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Russ Crandall
Ryan A.
Ryan Easby
Ryan Gertsch
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Ryan Litwin
Ryan Lord
Ryan Robertson
Ryan Scott Finkelstein
Ryan Senese
Ryan Stevens
Ryan Y
S Busby
SadisticZeus
Sagnik Sarkar
Sam "Samwa"
Wilkinson
sam bird
Sam Hughes
Sam Kleb
Sam Mumufu Murdock
Sam Murdock
Sam Veneroso
Sam Von Ehren
Sam Woods
Sama & Laith
Samantha Masley
Samantha Thiel
Sammy G.
Samuel Michel Navarro
Samuel Zöttl
Sara Evans
Sarah Browne
Sarah Robbins
Sarah Shatan-Pardo
Sarto_XIII - Andrea
Sartori
Sascha Potthoff-
Wenner - Piwi
Sasha-Jade Hornby
Schmitty "TheSloshedPanda"
Pandanko
Schulzi
Scott Hitchcock
Scott Lewis
Scott Lineberg
Scott Richards
Scott Russell
scruffy
Sean Colletti
Sean Flannigan
Sean Hough
Sean Smulligan
Seiromem
Sergey Chernov
Seth Howerton
SevenStack
Shamim Jalal
Shane Fitzgibbon
Shaun 'MechaChrono'
Pennin
Shaun "Dubsmachine"
Double
Shawn Reed
Shelley Lowe
Shengnan Zhang

Servyn
Shireen, ShireenPlays
[YouTube]
Shlomie Liberow
Shreyas Amit
Vyavahare
Shreyas Vyavahare
Siddhartha Nayak
Simon "hitm4n"
Quincey
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Skye Nathaniel
Schliefer
Sloppy Joe Williamson
SMasley
Snake_doctor66
solanum
Spundae
Stadium ARTs
Star Cogan
Static Shock
Stelios Petrakis
Stepan 'Pololitr' Chmel
Stephen Hue
Stephen Shiu
STEVAS
Steve Blanding
Steve Correa
Steve Frost
Steve Ramirez
Steve Reid
Steve Vine
Steven "RC" Arce
Steven Arthur Nutting
SSG
Steven Fee
Steven Findlay
Steven Philippi
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Stuart McInally
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Sunshine
Sydney Holt
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Tavo G
Taylor Lyles
Teddy Park
Tenacious Ramen
Terence Merkelbach
Terry McClendon
Thaddeus Whitfield
Thamod Binmahfoodh
THEJEDIONE
Théo Paquier and the Gang des
Niqués
Théo Paquier et le gang
des sagouins
TheRezarection
Thom "Tama" Langley
Thomas Alvarez
Thomas Bourne
[Yvakari]
Thomas Creamer

Thomas Davies
Thomas Edge
Thomas Enstad
Thrillhouse198x
Tim Berry
Tim Hausman
Timchoi89
Timothy Harden
Tiny
Tito [MNP]
Tobias Kühn
Tom Barker
Tom Grinnell
Tom Rawlings
Tom Sheppard
Tommy Finnegan
Tony Escobar, Jr, MD
Tony Van Nguyen
Tor Enoch
Torugos2
Tosata Fujinami
Travis Wight
Travis Woloshyn
Tristan "PlayStation Portable"
Damen
Tristan Powell
Troy Harclerode
Tyler Cooper
Tyler Hilton
Tyler Lovell
Tyler M. Poelstra
Tyler Martin-Call
Tyler Rizzo
Tyler West
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Cook
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yvette reed
Ywain Tomos
Zachary Singh
Zaira
Zephrah Soto
Zisis Paraskevaidis



EPILOGUE.

Gaming handhelds have come in all shapes, sizes, price ranges, and specs during their history — they are forever adapting to trends and gamers' needs as time goes by. The one thing that doesn't change in every iteration, however, is the joy they give to millions of people from around the world on a daily basis.

Handhelds continue to be at the core of memories that children will cherish for the rest of their lives. Handhelds help pull adults out of dark holes that have consumed them. Handhelds are often cheaper when compared to their home console counterparts, opening up the joy of gaming to families who otherwise couldn't afford the latest technology.

More often than not, they are our first experience with the gaming industry as a whole, be it through a Game Boy, a Nintendo DS, a PSP, a portable PC, a handheld emulator, or a Nintendo Switch. They invite you into a world that aims to please, drip feeding you incredible experiences, memorable characters and stories that you can share with family and friends.

Just like the past, the future of handhelds will continue to deliver emotional experiences to millions through evolved hardware and more immersive games. Handheld enthusiasts should be excited for what's over the horizon because the competition is ramping up not only in the portable PC space, but also in the affordable market too, offering even more opportunity to game on the go, all over the world.

This book was designed to take you back through a nostalgic portal, to introduce you to the history of handheld gaming, from the heavy-hitters to the relatively unknown devices, while also diving into the memories of a group of people who grew up gaming on handhelds, found careers in talking about these systems, or whose lives were changed for the better by these devices even existing in the first place.

I hope with all of my heart that this book has been at once nostalgic and informative. This book is an art piece created by so many talented individuals who all have one thing in common: the love of handheld gaming devices.

Thank you for believing in this book, and thank you for reading this love letter to the history of handhelds.

Brandon Saltalamacchia

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